



NINA CLARE
THE JANE AUSTEN FAIRY TALES

Wishes

A RETELLING OF PRIDE & PREJUDICE

WISHES

A RETELLING OF PRIDE & PREJUDICE

NINA CLARE

LOST&FOUNDSTORIES

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Free Novella

Also by Nina Clare

A DESIRABLE MATCH

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a son and heir.

Perhaps the man in question holds the fortune of a very modest manor, a home farm, and a respectably stocked poultry house. Or perhaps he dwells in a grand and imposing mansion on a great estate with many farms, a lake of trout, excellent stables, and a park full of deer. In either case, the necessity of a son to perpetuate the family name and retain the property remains the same.

Under usual circumstances, such an acquisition comes to pass in the natural order of things between the man of fortune and his good lady wife, but on occasion the natural order appears to fail, and supernatural means are sought for. Whether it is wise to try to interfere with the natural order of things, either by magic or by science, is a question much debated.

GEORGE DARCY AND HIS WIFE, Lady Anne Darcy (née Lady Anne Fitzwilliam), were the kind of people to leave the supernatural well alone. After all, they had done very well without it so far. Their own parentage had been excellent, and they duly accepted the mantle of responsibility for all that had come to them by way of inheritance. They were diligent in their duty in maintaining the estate that was theirs upon their union. They were of a serious and sober temperament, though known to be fair as master and mistress, and were kind to the poor.

There were a few anxious years when no children were forthcoming, and Lady Anne once or twice tilted her genteel head in the direction of her lady's maid's suggestions that there were 'things that could be done' to help a woman bear a son: things that involved wisewomen and their charms, or other fairfolk and their gifts. But Lady Anne did not succumb, and she felt she was rewarded in maintaining her practical, non-magical sensibilities when she finally gave birth to a healthy, handsome boy five years into her marriage.

She agreed with her husband that there would be no faery godmother sought out for their son. They had sufficient noble blood on her part to be entitled to one, albeit a lesser one, for their son was no princeling for whom they could seek the blessing of a powerful faery godmother if they so chose. But Lady Anne agreed with her husband that there was always a risk in bringing fairfolk into the family; they could be so unpredictable, and they sometimes made unreasonable demands. They would have Lady Anne's sister, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, as godmother, and Lady Anne's brother, Sir John Fitzwilliam, Earl of Aelfstone, as godfather. Two sensible, trustworthy, non-magical, well-titled guardians were exactly what they desired for their precious son and heir.

It was a pleasant coincidence that on the day that little Fitzwilliam Darcy was born, another son was born on the family estate of Pemberley: the new steward and his wife had likewise been blessed with their first child, whom they named George, in honour of their venerable master.

Every tenant and servant of the Pemberley estate agreed among themselves that they were enjoying a highly propitious season, such as had never been known before. Not only did the master and the head steward have a son born that autumnal equinox day, but the mistress's mare had given birth to twins in the stable, and the prize spotted sow in the piggery now had the biggest litter ever seen, while the apple pressing gave double the usual yield that year, as did the field crops.

Such signs of abundance were remarked upon and celebrated throughout the estate; there was no doubt that some good spirit was residing among them and distributing such blessings. But none had seen a wisewoman in the village, or a faery ring in the woodlands, or found gifts left outside their doors after a full moon, or yet noted any of the usual signs of the fairfolk in the vicinity. But all agreed, excepting the master and mistress, to whom no one talked of such things, that undoubtedly a goodly

member of the fairfolk was among them in the form of what was called a wisewoman. Long may the wisewoman remain among them, that their milk would readily churn and their cream be rich and their bread always rise and their pigs be fat and their turnips sweet.

LITTLE FITZWILLIAM DARCY was five years of age before his godmother condescended to make a visit to Pemberley.

Lady Catherine arrived in great state with a procession of servants and accoutrements filling three carriages, with six groomsmen bearing trunks. It was almost all for Lady Catherine's child, as was explained upon arrival: two nursemaids, one night nurse, a girl to rock the cradle, one physician, one cook, and an apothecary all attended upon the infant girl. In addition, Lady Catherine's maid, under butler, and French cook accompanied her ladyship.

Lady Anne Darcy raised her eyebrows at such an entourage rattling up the long driveway to the house and wondered if there were room enough in the stables for so many horses. But she retained all the grace of a hostess and all the deference of a younger sister, and she welcomed Lady Catherine and her new daughter with true pleasure.

'She is delightful, Catherine,' said Lady Anne as the sisters sat in the gardens under the shade of the rose arbour. 'I believe she has our mother's chin. Mama had a dimple in exactly the same place, do you recall? You wrote that you could not determine upon her name, having only chosen boys' names, but I suppose you will call her Catherine?'

'No, indeed. Lord de Bourgh will call her Kitty, or Cathy, or some other vulgar contraction. I will not have my daughter sounding like a housemaid. She will be named after our mother.'

'Oh, how delightful! Then she will be my namesake also.'

'It's no compliment to you. I choose that name because one cannot make a vulgar contraction out of Anne,' said Lady Catherine.

'I am yet delighted to have such a darling poppet share my name,' replied Lady Anne mildly.

'She is not a poppet. I despise euphemisms. She is Anne Catherine Persephone de Bourgh.'

‘Persephone?’

Lady Catherine flinched. ‘Lord de Bourgh’s mother’s name.’

‘How romantic.’

‘How ridiculous.’ Lady Catherine gave a little shiver in the summer air. ‘But where is he? Where is my nephew? He must be up from his afternoon nap by now.’

Lady Anne looked about the garden and spied the nurse leading young Fitzwilliam by the hand. Lady Anne waved to call them over.

‘So here he is,’ said Lady Catherine when Fitzwilliam stood before her, still holding fast to his nurse’s hand. ‘He is very small,’ she said, looking her nephew up and down.

‘He is only five,’ replied his mother.

‘All the Fitzwilliams are tall,’ stated Lady Catherine. ‘We are a remarkably tall and handsome family, are we not?’

Lady Anne agreed that they were.

‘Never forget,’ Lady Catherine told her nephew, ‘that you bear the blood of the Fitzwilliams as well as the name of Darcy, young man. On you rests all the honour and wealth of generations.’

Fitzwilliam looked gravely back at his aunt.

‘And to you will be united the blood and wealth of the house of de Bourgh upon your marriage. What superlative estates you will be master over. What power you will wield. What respect you will command. You will be one of the wealthiest landowners in the kingdom. What say you to that?’

Fitzwilliam had nothing to say to that.

‘Now come and kiss your new cousin, Fitzwilliam,’ ordered Lady Catherine.

Fitzwilliam looked shyly at his nurse.

‘Go along, Master Fitzwilliam,’ whispered Plumtree, his nurse. ‘Do as your aunt bids you.’

Fitzwilliam took a step towards the sleeping baby in his aunt’s arms.

‘Come along, boy,’ ordered Lady Catherine. ‘This is your future bride. You must kiss her as a sign of betrothal.’

Fitzwilliam now cast a look of reluctance at his mother.

‘It is well, Fitzwilliam,’ his mother reassured him. ‘Little Anne will be your wife when you are all grown up into a man like Papa. So give her a kiss like a good boy.’

Fitzwilliam inched forwards and peered at baby Anne's face. His own small face screwed up in distaste at what he saw: such a red, wrinkly thing, like an old apple.

'Come along, boy, what is the matter with you?' demanded Lady Catherine. 'You must kiss her at your first meeting, or the betrothal will not be complete. It is a tradition bound by an old faery promise on Lord de Bourgh's side of the family.'

Fitzwilliam obediently leaned forward, but before his unwilling lips could reach the infant's face, the baby was whisked away from him with a cry of vexation from his aunt. Three fat bees were flying about Lady Catherine's head, causing her to turn inelegantly from one side to another, waving a hand to swat at the insects. A nursemaid hurried forward to pluck the infant out of danger, and Fitzwilliam hurried back to his own nurse's side, relieved to have been released from having to kiss the ugly scrunched-up face inside the shawl.

'Did he kiss her?' asked Lady Catherine, when the bees had flown away. 'Did he kiss her before those vile creatures flew in my face?'

'I believe so,' answered Lady Anne. 'You kissed the baby, did you not, Fitzwilliam?'

Fitzwilliam moved his head in a manner that was perceived as a nod.

'Good,' said Lady Catherine, looking about her anxiously. 'I despise bees. You have too many roses, Anne. You must have them cut them back so as not to attract the wretched things.'

'Bees are wondrous things,' said an elderly voice from behind Lady Catherine. 'What would the world be without honey, eh?'

'Who are you?' asked Lady Catherine. 'Who is this, Anne?'

Lady Anne and the attendant nursemaids stared in astonishment at the ragged old woman who had appeared, seemingly, from nowhere.

'Get away with you, you filthy beggar!' commanded Lady Catherine.

But the filthy beggar remained where she was.

'I've come to give a blessing to the children,' said the old woman.

'Get away,' repeated Lady Catherine. 'We want none of your beggary here!'

'I ask for nothing,' said the woman. 'I come to give.'

'Oh, do let her give her blessing, sister,' urged Lady Anne. 'She is but a harmless old woman. Give your blessing, good mother, and you may call at the kitchen for some victuals.'

‘Never feed them!’ commanded Lady Catherine. ‘You will encourage them. Get away from my child—do not lay one filthy finger upon her!’

The old woman had stretched out a hand towards the sleeping baby.

‘Very well,’ she rasped, withdrawing her hand. ‘No blessing will I leave upon thine house. Thou shall be left alone, just as thee wish. But thee, my fine boy.’ She moved towards Fitzwilliam, who looked with fascination at the strange old woman. She put a hand on his dark head and touched one of his hands while showing a row of brown teeth at him. ‘The blessings of all that matters most in a man: a good heart to give, and a good heart to win for thine bride.’

‘This is his bride,’ said Lady Catherine haughtily. ‘Now get away from our children, before I call for a manservant to see you off!’

‘Take her to the kitchens and see that she has a good meal,’ Lady Anne whispered to Plumtree.

Plumtree turned to lead the old woman away. ‘But where’s she gone?’ she exclaimed, turning around in a circle.

Everyone looked about them.

‘I didn’t see her go,’ said Plumtree.

‘Me neither,’ replied the baby’s maid.

Lady Anne gaped at her sister, who stared back at her with a shrug of her lace-mantled shoulders.

‘Good riddance,’ said Lady Catherine, sitting down again under the arbour.

The nursemaids looked afraid.

‘How strange,’ said Lady Anne, still gaping a little in astonishment at the place where the old woman had stood. ‘How very strange.’

Fitzwilliam looked down at the shiny thing like a little hammered nugget of silver that had been pressed into the palm of his hand, and he closed his hand tightly as though he held a secret treasure.

THE PLEASURES OF YOUTH

‘You look very fine, Master Fitzwilliam,’ said the groom. ‘A remarkable thing to be on your first horse instead of a pony, at only eight years old. A natural-born horseman, if ever I saw one.’

‘A family trait,’ said Mr. Darcy, looking pleased at the figure of his son as he sat mounted beside him.

Fitzwilliam felt himself swelling with pride and pleasure.

‘We’ll ride down to the south boundary first,’ said his father. ‘Check the fencing has been repaired properly. Then to Fairweather Farm to check there was no damage to the cottages after the storm. And we shall see how the tilling is coming on in the east meadows.’

‘May we see how the trout are doing in the river, Father?’

‘Not today. Estate business always comes before pleasure, Fitzwilliam. Duty first.’

Fitzwilliam tried not to look disappointed.

‘We’ll do a spot of fishing tomorrow afternoon if there’s time after my morning’s work.’

The steward was already examining the repairs to the fencing when they reached the south boundary. He bowed to his master and touched his cap to the young master.

‘Is the fencing up to standard, Wickham?’ Mr. Darcy called out.

‘It is, sir. Though I’ve found a few more spots of rot further down. I’ll get them replaced directly. ’Tis a shame we didn’t purchase some preservation charms to bury along the fence, sir. They’d last a good deal longer if we did.’

‘Now, none of that, my good man,’ said Mr. Darcy. ‘Once we start with preservation charms, the rest of the estate will be clamouring for boundary charms, then breeding charms, then brewing charms, and there’ll be no end to it all. I’ll not sink half the estate profits into the old ways. We’ll do things by the new ways at Pemberley, understood?’

‘Yes, sir. Understood.’

‘Good man. And who is this?’ Mr. Darcy was nodding at the small figure stood behind Mr. Wickham.

‘This is my son, sir. He’s come of age to begin his apprenticeship. He’ll be learning the trade by my side. We did discuss it, sir, if you recall?’

‘Ah, yes. I recall. Same age as Fitzwilliam, is he not?’

‘That he is, sir. Born the same day, matter of fact.’

‘What’s your name, boy?’ asked Mr. Darcy.

The boy stepped forward, his chestnut brown waves falling across his face as he made a bow. Fitzwilliam watched him with interest, not knowing any boys his own age. Cousin John was the closest boy in age to him that he knew, but he was two years older and only came to visit in the summer.

The boy caught Fitzwilliam’s eye as he unbent himself, and his mouth twitched as though he wanted to smile at him.

‘Name’s George, sir,’ said the boy in a clear voice. ‘George Wickham.’

‘Fine-looking boy,’ said Mr. Darcy to his steward. ‘Fine choice of name. Send him up to share Fitzwilliam’s fencing lessons; he’s the right size for a practise partner.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ said Mr. Wickham with another bow. ‘That would be an honour.’

George’s twitching mouth moved into a grin of pleasure.

SIR LAMBREY HAD BEEN a knight of renown in his youth. Fitzwilliam knew this because Sir Lambrey told him stories of his great battles, heroic escapades, and dragon hunting in between giving Fitzwilliam fencing lessons. Fitzwilliam thought it was a shame that Sir Lambrey had lost all his money and land and was now reduced to living in the quarters above the stables with the other menservants, but Sir Lambrey would not speak of that.

George Wickham laughed a lot, even when learning fencing. He laughed when he lunged at Fitzwilliam, and he laughed when they parried

blows. Fitzwilliam was a little fascinated by him; no one laughed much at home. Mother smiled readily but did not laugh very often. The servants laughed a good deal in the kitchens, but Father did not like Fitzwilliam sitting in the kitchens and had put a stop to it, saying it was important to keep to one's own sphere.

'Well done, Master Fitzwilliam,' said Sir Lambrey when that morning's lesson concluded. 'Your circular parry is coming along excellently.'

'And what of my parry?' cried George.

'You show promise, lad, but you must listen to instruction if you want to get on. First rule of martial discipline: follow your commanding officer's orders.'

George pulled a face behind Sir Lambrey's back as he walked away at the conclusion of that morning's lesson.

'Let's go down to the river and catch fish,' he said eagerly to Fitzwilliam.

That was an enticing suggestion, but Fitzwilliam hesitated. His morning fencing lesson was always followed by a history and geography lesson in the study chamber with Master Tyndall. History and geography had been interesting when Master Tyndall had taught him about the Dragon Wars and the Forgotten Isles with their great sea monsters and giants, but Father had said Fitzwilliam didn't need to learn about such things; only modern history mattered now, said Father, so Master Tyndall had ceased those lessons.

'Come on,' urged George. 'No one will miss you for a half-hour.'

The temptation was too much. The only thing Fitzwilliam loved more than fishing was riding his horse, and he did not love memorising dynastic wars and trading routes in the least. So to the river they went.

They cast their lines out and sat on the bank to see who would get the first bite. Time seemed to pass slowly in their impatience, and George got up and began kicking at a rotten log in his restlessness.

'Do you want to see the sprite tree?' Fitzwilliam asked, also feeling a little impatient after waiting so long for a bite. George did, so Fitzwilliam led him a little way along the bank until they came to an old and gnarled tree.

'So where's the tree sprites?' asked George.

'You have to be really quiet,' whispered Fitzwilliam. 'They won't come out if they know you're there.'

They stood watching for some minutes. A red squirrel came scampering across the ground, gathered up a fallen acorn, and shimmied up the tree in

an undulating wave. Two more squirrels appeared, watching the boys with their shiny eyes. George bent down and picked up some acorns from the ground.

‘Watch this,’ George said, and he threw an acorn at a squirrel, narrowly missing it, then threw a second acorn after it as it scampered away.

‘Don’t!’ cried Fitzwilliam, knocking the acorns out of George’s hand.

George laughed at Fitzwilliam’s glaring face. ‘It’s only a stupid squirrel. My father says they’re pests. They’re rats with fluffed-out tails.’

‘You leave them alone. They’re not your squirrels!’

‘Oh, course not,’ said George half-angrily, half-mockingly. ‘Everything belongs to *your* father, I suppose. You keep your tree-rats, see if I care. And you haven’t got any tree sprites anyhow!’

Fitzwilliam returned to his fishing line and did not speak to George for what felt like a long time.

The uneasy silence was broken by Fitzwilliam’s line twitching, and both boys jumped up in excitement to reel the wriggling fish in.

‘Well,’ said George, when the trout had been despatched, ‘you get all the luck. You’ve caught a fine one, and I’ve caught nothing.’

‘There’s plenty more,’ Fitzwilliam answered, forgetting that he wasn’t talking to George in his excitement at getting a good catch.

But there was no more fishing or talking to be had that morning, for a footman from the house came hurrying along the river path, looking very relieved to see his young master stood by the riverside.

‘Master Fitzwilliam, I’ve been sent to look for you. I’ve been halfway about the estate looking. Master Tyndall said you didn’t come for your lessons, and your father’s not best pleased to hear it. They’ll be no fishing for you this afternoon, says your father.’

‘Well, that’s not lucky,’ Fitzwilliam said gloomily to George as he gathered up his line. ‘Here, give this to your mother with my compliments,’ he said, echoing the words he often heard his father say. And he left him the fine trout.

HAPPY DAY

Young Fitzwilliam was eight when he next saw the strange old woman who had appeared and disappeared on the day he was betrothed to Cousin Anne.

It was a holiday, and Fitzwilliam had been granted his request to spend the morning fishing. Old Teasel, a retired footman, had the honour of accompanying the young master as his chaperone. This pleased Fitzwilliam, for Teasel was sure to sit down against a tree trunk while Fitzwilliam fished, and there he would obligingly fall asleep, which gave Fitzwilliam the pleasant feeling that he was alone, and therefore a young man and not a boy in need of supervision.

It was a pity George couldn't come with him, but he was helping his father that day. Fitzwilliam didn't mind too much. He never felt lonely when he was by the water. He whiled away the golden hours of late morning with his fishing, and when he tired of failing to catch anything bigger than his hand, he wandered away for a ramble.

He followed the path of the climbing sun as it danced along the water's edge, lighting up the irises and flag-lilies and resting at the edge of the woodlands, where it left the ferns and bluebells to their preferred shade.

Fitzwilliam stopped short when he saw the old woman sitting upon a fallen log among the bluebells. He wasn't sure if she were smiling or grimacing at him; it was hard to tell when all he could see was a row of crooked brown teeth bared before him. But the little round robin sitting on her shoulder intrigued him, and a twitching movement at her feet aroused more curiosity and caused him to move nearer.

‘Is that a squirrel?’ he asked quietly, for he knew well enough to talk quietly around animals. The old woman looked down at her feet.

‘A clever lad as thee knows a squirrel when he sees one,’ she said. And she bent down and gave the squirrel some kind of nut.

‘Is he your pet?’ asked Fitzwilliam, edging closer.

‘A clever lad as thee knows thou does not make a pet out of a squirrel. He’s mine friend.’

‘Is he your friend too?’ Fitzwilliam looked at the bright-eyed robin, who looked back at him.

She did not answer, but she stood up so that the robin flitted away and the squirrel scampered up the nearest tree.

‘Thou has grown into a handsome lad,’ the old woman said, looking him up and down. ‘Thou shall grow handsomer yet.’ She showed him her brown teeth again.

‘Are you the woman who gave me a silver penny and disappeared?’ asked Fitzwilliam, a dim memory coming back to him. He took out the silvery disc from the pocket at his belt, where he always kept his best treasures.

‘ ’Tis no penny,’ said the woman. ‘ ’Tis a wish.’

‘A wish?’

Suddenly there was a small basket in her hands, though Fitzwilliam could not recall it being there a moment ago. She beckoned him closer, and he looked inside. A little heap of silvery discs lay there, each one like a small nugget of silver that had been hammered flat.

‘Are they all wishes?’

‘Take one. A boy who throws no stones at mine friends may have a little reward.’

Fitzwilliam took one. ‘What shall I do with it?’

‘Make a wish. ’Tis only a small wish. Thou cannot wish for something big.’

‘Thank you,’ said Fitzwilliam, but when he pulled his gaze away from the silvery wish back to the wish-giver, she was gone. He turned round in a circle looking for her, but all he could see was old Teasel hurrying towards him, waving his cap.

‘Master Fitzwilliam, I was afeared you’d fell into the water! What a way you have of disappearing when I take my eye off you one moment!’

Old Teasel seemed half-angry at Fitzwilliam, half-relieved to see that the young heir had not drowned whilst under his care.

Fitzwilliam was too full of thoughts about his two wishes, and what he should use them for, to pay much heed to the scolding, and he followed his chaperone back to the house.

FITZWILLIAM WAS NOT GENERALLY one for making rash decisions, and he held onto the wishes all that day and thought about them long into the night, wondering what he should choose wish for.

‘Look,’ he said to George next morning. He opened his hand to show George what he held.

‘What is it?’ George tried to take it, but Fitzwilliam closed his fist over it.

‘It’s a wish.’

They were following behind Sir Lambrey on their way to the fencing yard.

‘A real one? From a faery?’

‘I don’t know if she was a faery. It was an old woman with a basket of wishes.’

‘Where was she?’

‘She was sitting in the woods.’

‘Let me have a look, just a look; I won’t wish nothing. Promise.’

Fitzwilliam let him take the precious wish. George turned it over and ran his finger around its uneven edges. ‘Wish I had a wish,’ he murmured.

‘Hey!’ said Fitzwilliam, snatching back the wish. ‘Don’t wish for something; it’s my wish.’

‘Didn’t work anyway,’ said George. ‘I don’t reckon it is a real wish. I reckon someone’s jesting with you.’

‘It didn’t work because you can’t wish for more wishes. Everyone knows that. It *is* real.’

‘Prove it, then. Make a wish. I would wish that I was a rich lord with a great big manor—no, a castle with lots of knights and—’

‘She said it’s only a small wish,’ said Fitzwilliam, pocketing it away from George’s hungry eyes.

‘How small?’

‘I don’t know, I haven’t used it yet. But I don’t think a castle would be small.’

‘Why don’t you wish that Lambrey would fall asleep the whole morning so we can go fishing?’

‘I’d rather wait until we’re allowed to go fishing and wish that we could catch lots of good ones.’

‘Wish we had two wishes,’ said George. ‘One to put Lambrey to sleep and one to catch heaps of fish.’

Fitzwilliam did not speak of the second wish that was in his pocket. He decided he would rather keep that one a secret. He had carried it as a treasure for three years, and he wanted to keep it so.

When the day’s lessons were over, George met him, and they ran with great excitement down to their favourite fishing spot.

‘Come on then,’ urged George. ‘Make the wish. This is going to be the best day of fishing ever! I suppose you can’t wish that we could catch heaps of fish every time we come, and no one else, only us?’

‘I don’t think it’s a big enough wish for that,’ said Fitzwilliam. ‘I could try.’

He took out the wish and held it in his outstretched palm, regarding the silvery disc with the utmost gravity.

‘I wish . . .’ He paused.

‘Go on,’ urged George, hopping from one foot to another in his excitement.

‘I wish that we, George and I, would catch heaps of fish every time we come here.’

‘And no one else can catch any!’ added George. ‘Say that!’

‘Doesn’t seem fair,’ said Fitzwilliam, thinking of his father, who enjoyed a spot of fishing when he had time.

‘Is that it?’ asked George. ‘Nothing’s happened.’ The silvery disc looked grey and lifeless. ‘How do we know if it’s worked?’

‘Perhaps it was too big a wish,’ said Fitzwilliam. ‘Perhaps I should try a smaller one. The part about us catching them every time might be too big.’

‘Go on, then! Wish that we could catch heaps of fish just for today.’

‘I wish we could catch heaps of fish today.’

There was silence, and the wish lay grey and still. Fitzwilliam’s heart sank with disappointment.

But then the silence was broken by the sound of a soft, watery plop, and George lunged for his line with a shout of glee. Fitzwilliam looked from the water back to his hand, and the wish was gone. His own line twitched, and he dived at it with a laugh.

‘WELL, I NEVER!’ exclaimed Monsieur Fournier, the head cook. He eyed the basket, brimming with large trout. ‘You say you caught all these, Master?’

Fitzwilliam nodded happily. ‘George Wickham took home a basketful too.’

The other kitchen staff were peering over one another’s shoulders, marvelling at the young master’s bounty.

‘Told you there’s a powerful wisewoman took up somewhere on the estate,’ said one of the footmen. ‘Everything’s doubled over: the crops, the orchard, the animals, now the fish.’

‘Wish our wages would double,’ said the hall boy.

‘We’ll have to smoke them,’ said Monsieur Fournier’s assistant. ‘Too many to eat at once.’

‘Unless we *all* dine on baked trout,’ said one of the maids with a giggle.

FOLLIES & VICES

That night Fitzwilliam lay awake. He was watching his bedroom grow brighter as the full moon climbed up and shone through the window. He was thinking about the strange old woman and the wishes. He thought of what he could use his last wish for and finally decided he would keep it for something special. It occurred to him that it might be easy to make an accidental wish if he carried it about, so he got up and fumbled inside the pocket of his breeches, which were laid on the clothes chest at the end of his bed. He took out the wish and put it inside his little carved box where he kept his silver coins that Uncle Fitzwilliam, his namesake, gave him when he visited.

George came tearing up to the courtyard next morning, his face flushed and his eyes brighter than usual.

‘Why didn’t you come to fencing class?’ Fitzwilliam asked. ‘Where have you been?’

George laughed and pulled a small linen bag out of a new shirt. A rather fancy shirt, Fitzwilliam noticed, with embroidery at the neck. ‘Look!’

Fitzwilliam peered inside and gasped. ‘Wishes! Lots of them!’

George laughed again and did a little jig. ‘I’ve already wished myself a new shirt; it took two wishes—one to change my old shirt into nice new linen, and one for the patterns. He looked down admiringly at himself. ‘Do I look like a real gent? I did wish for a fine pair of riding boots and a crop, but the wishes aren’t good enough for that. I think they can only do regular stuff like linen and silk.’

‘But where did you get them?’ Fitzwilliam put out a hand to pick up a wish, but George hopped away.

‘You didn’t let me have your wish yesterday; don’t think you can take mine!’

‘Where did you get them?’ Fitzwilliam repeated.

‘From the old hag, of course.’

‘The old woman in the woods? She gave you all of them?’

‘Why not? Do you think you should get everything? Why shouldn’t I have some good luck for a change?’

George ran away towards the house, and Fitzwilliam ran after him. They charged round to the servants’ entrance and down the stairs into the kitchens where Mrs. Goodly was making up a tea tray for Lady Anne.

‘What are you doing here, young Wickham?’ Mrs. Goodly asked pertly. ‘I don’t want none of your mischief so early in the day.’ She caught sight of Fitzwilliam, who had caught George up. ‘Morning, Master Fitzwilliam,’ she said with a bob.

‘I wish all the servants would bob to me this morning,’ said George.

Fitzwilliam saw the silvery wish vanish from George’s fingers, and Mrs. Goodly gave a curtsy to George and walked off with Lady Anne’s tray.

George grinned. ‘Let’s see if Leghorne bows to me. I’d like to see that old crab-apple face bobbing instead of cuffing me on the ear for a change.’

George ran into the pantries where the butler was usually to be found at that time of the morning. To Fitzwilliam’s surprise and George’s delight, the butler did bow to both of them, but he still gave George a swipe on the ear for his ‘impudent grin’ as he passed by.

‘I suppose you’ll have to use two wishes if you want him to bow to you and not cuff you,’ said Fitzwilliam.

George rubbed his ear and looked about the pantry. He stuck his hand into his shirt to pull out a wish. ‘I wish someone would give me a fruit cake and a jug of beer,’ he said.

Mrs. Reynolds, the housekeeper, came in with her grey gown swishing neatly about her. She gave a little bob to the boys and wished Master Fitzwilliam good morning. She paused before the pantry shelves, looking a little puzzled as though she did not quite understand what she was supposed to do. She put a hand out towards a large fruitcake wrapped in clean muslin, took it down, and turned to George, still looking baffled. ‘Here you are, young Wickham. Don’t eat it all at once.’

A footman came in carrying a jug of beer. He bowed to the boys and handed George the jug with a perplexed expression.

‘Why are you giving him that?’ Mrs. Reynolds asked.

‘I don’t rightly know,’ said the footman. ‘Did you give him that great big cake?’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Reynolds with a frown.

George laughed, took a long drink of beer, and turned to leave.

‘Don’t drink all that jug,’ called out Mrs. Reynolds after them. ‘You’ll make yourself sick.’

‘Want some?’ George said, offering Fitzwilliam the beer.

Fitzwilliam hesitated. It wouldn’t do to turn up to his lessons smelling of beer. He was only allowed beer at supper, and Mother made sure it was watered down.

‘Go on,’ urged George.

‘What about lessons?’ asked Fitzwilliam before taking a small mouthful. He handed the jug back.

‘Pah!’ snorted George. He pulled out a wish. ‘I wish there were no lessons today!’ The wish disappeared. ‘Come on! Shall we fish first, or wish the horses to ride as fast as the wind?’

Fitzwilliam hesitated again. He’d promised his father he wouldn’t skip his lessons, but if George had wished the lessons away, then there were no lessons to skip. His hesitation was momentary, and he ran after George towards the stables. They ducked out of sight of a groom leading Lady Anne’s mare up to the house, then slipped unseen into the stables where the family horses were housed.

‘Don’t you think Brutus is a bit big to manage?’ Fitzwilliam asked, seeing George opening the stall of his father’s newest horse. ‘He’s not used to anyone else.’

‘I’ll soon wish him into behaving for me,’ said George confidently. He had finished the jug of beer and tossed it aside in the straw. Fitzwilliam thought George looked a bit odd, like his father’s guests did when they’d been drinking lots of wine and beer in the hall at a grand dinner.

‘I wish you’d stand still,’ said George to the horse, which ended Brutus’s protests at being handled. George had stuffed the fruitcake down his shirt to free his hands. He pulled up a stool and clambered up to sit astride Brutus. He took hold of his mane and said loudly, ‘I wish you’d run like the wind down to the fishing stream!’

Fitzwilliam had no time to call out that George had forgotten to wish that Fitzwilliam's horse would run like the wind because George had shot out of the stable in a blur of black horse and a shriek that could have been excitement, or could have been terror. Fitzwilliam hurriedly mounted his horse and rode bareback after George as fast as he could, which was not very fast. His horse was a gentle mare, picked out for the safety of an eight-year-old boy, and he found riding without a saddle and reins harder than expected.

HE FOUND George down by the river, but there was no Brutus to be seen.

'What's the matter, George?' He slipped down from Paloma and wondered how he was to tie her up when she had no halter on. 'Stay there, Paloma,' he commanded. George was lying on his back. He gave a little groan as Fitzwilliam bent over him. 'Are you hurt? Did Brutus throw you?'

George groaned again.

'You look awfully white, George. I'll get help.'

'No,' groaned George. 'Just make a wish that I'll feel better.' His words were slurred. He was trying to take a wish from inside his shirt, but he couldn't seem to find the way.

'I think you drank too much beer, George.'

'Hurry . . . up . . . an' . . . wish . . . me . . . better,' slurred George miserably.

Fitzwilliam took a wish from the bag stuffed inside George's shirt and made the necessary request. The wish disappeared from his hand, and George sat up, his colour restored to his face.

'Deuce take it if I ever touch beer again!' cried George. 'Never felt so sick as that before!'

'You did drink the whole jug. I think you've squashed the cake; you must have rolled on it.'

George pulled the cake out of his grass-stained shirt and unwrapped it. It was very squashed. 'Tastes just as good squished as is does whole,' he said, cramming his mouth full. 'Here, have some.'

'We forgot the fishing lines,' said Fitzwilliam, sitting down beside George to eat his handful of cake.

'I'll wish for some.' But it seemed that wishing something out of thin air did not work.

‘How many wishes have you got left?’ asked Fitzwilliam.

‘ ‘Bout a dozen.’

‘Are you going to share them?’

‘Why should I? Haven’t you got enough of everything already? Now you want my wishes too.’

‘I thought we were friends. Friends share things.’

‘I’m sharing my cake, aren’t I?’

‘It’s not really your cake, is it? It’s my—’

‘It’s your father’s, I suppose!’ said George. ‘Like everything else in the world!’

‘Not in the world. But whatever’s in his house belongs to him. And the stables.’ Fitzwilliam was feeling troubled by letting George take his father’s newest horse. He looked around. ‘Where is Brutus?’

‘Don’t know,’ said George sullenly. ‘Good name for him—he is a brute. He tried to kick me when I got down.’

‘Can’t you wish him back? Father will be angry if he gets lost.’

‘Why should I waste one of my wishes on that vicious beast? I’ve got better things to wish for.’

Fitzwilliam got up, letting the currants and crumbs fall from his shirt to the grass. ‘Paloma’s gone off somewhere too,’ he said, his voice tight. ‘I’m going to find them and take them back to the stables.’

‘Don’t go, we haven’t done any fishing yet.’

‘I don’t want to fish with a mean and stingy good-for-nothing who won’t share his wishes, even though he shares in my father’s horse and cake and beer.’

‘Come back, and I’ll give you a stupid wish.’

Fitzwilliam turned back and held out his hand. George took a wish and reluctantly tossed it at him.

Fitzwilliam sat back down and thought hard.

‘Go on then, what you going to wish for?’

A robin flitted close by and sat in the grass, fixing its shiny, black eye on them. Fitzwilliam looked hard at it for a moment, and then looked down at the wish in his hand. ‘How come the old woman gave you so many?’ he asked.

George shrugged. ‘Didn’t say she gave me them, did I? I said I got them from the old hag.’

‘You stole them,’ said Fitzwilliam slowly.

‘I didn’t steal them. I found them. They were lying in a basket while she was off picking something in the woods, so I took a handful. Or two.’

The robin flitted closer.

Fitzwilliam tossed the wish down on the grass. ‘Have it back. A gentleman doesn’t steal things from old women.’ He got up. ‘I’m going to find the horses.’

George stared up at him. ‘You’re such a puttock! It ain’t stealing when it’s just from an old bawdy-basket!’

‘Don’t call her a bawdy-basket, and don’t call me a puttock—you . . . you . . . saddle-goose!’

‘You mangy pillock!’ retorted George, jumping up so that his cake tumbled to the ground.

‘You pigeon-livered pygmy!’ cried Fitzwilliam.

‘You tallow-catch, plague-sore, clay-brained, snail-paced, whey-faced, lubberwort blockhead!’ George pulled out a wish and held it up. ‘I wish you were a slimy spotted toad so I could throw you in the river!’

But nothing happened, and Fitzwilliam gave him one last angry look before running off to find the horses.

AN UNFORGIVING TEMPER

Paloma was not difficult to find. Her light colour stood out against the ivied walls of the kitchen garden. A gate had been left open, and she had wandered in to nibble the carrot tops. She had managed to pull some of the carrots up, judging by the holes in the neat rows and the hoof marks in the earth. Fitzwilliam saw where bunches of freshly dug-up beetroot had been lying on a bench to let the dirt dry from them. Now there were only the bits of twine that had tied them up lying on the ground, while Paloma was chewing contentedly, a beet leaf sticking out of her mouth and pink juice staining her muzzle. The row of canes that had been laden with green beans was now suspiciously bare, and the lines of frothy lettuces looked decimated.

‘Oh dear,’ said Fitzwilliam, looking at the carnage. It took another head of lettuce to bribe Paloma out of the garden, but finally she was safely returned to the stables, while Brutus’s stall remained empty.

‘I tell you, they was here an hour ago, for I mucked ’em out and watered ’em. I come back after saddling up Mistress’s mare and cleaned some tack, and when I came back, they were gone!’

It was the voice of one of the grooms, and Fitzwilliam, feeling a sudden wave of guilt, ducked behind a grain bin out of sight.

‘Did you say the palomino mare was gone?’ asked the voice of the horse master. ‘Why, she’s here in her stall. But the master’s new yearling isn’t.’

‘I tell you, she was gone too,’ said the groom, sounding puzzled. ‘What’s that pink stuff round her mouth?’

‘Never mind pink stuff, where’s the master’s new horse? He’s worth a small ransom!’

‘I’ll saddle up one of the work horses and ride round the estate and look for him,’ said the groom.

‘Upon my best harness and crop, you won’t!’ cried the horse master. ‘You’ll stay here and make sure you don’t lose any more horses, and I’ll ride out to look for him. And if I find who’s let him out, I’ll have their hide for a new saddle!’

‘YOU’RE VERY QUIET this evening, Fitzwilliam, dear,’ said Lady Anne. She leaned forward to put a hand to his forehead. ‘You’re not feeling unwell, are you? You look a little pale.’

Fitzwilliam shook his head.

‘How were your lessons today?’ his father asked. Fitzwilliam squirmed on his chair. Usually he loved this hour of the evening when he sat with his parents for a short while before they went up to dress for dinner. Usually he liked to talk to his father of all he had learnt that day.

‘Fitzwilliam could not have any lessons today,’ his mother said. ‘Master Tyndall took a funny turn and announced that he could do no teaching. He went to lie down, and Mrs. Reynolds was sent in to him with the apothecary’s black tonic.’

Fitzwilliam felt a twinge of guilt to hear that Master Tyndall had been dosed up with the black tonic. Nothing tasted so bad as the black one.

‘A funny turn?’ asked Mr. Darcy.

Lady Anne nodded. ‘He is well again this evening. I enquired after him. There will be lessons as usual tomorrow.’

‘So what did you do with yourself instead, Fitzwilliam?’ asked his father, sipping at his cup of tea.

‘I . . . um . . . went for a ride.’

‘Did you see anything of the strange business down at the stables today?’ asked his father.

‘Strange business?’ repeated Fitzwilliam faintly.

‘Seems that Brutus managed to open his stall, or more likely one of the grooms did not secure it properly. He got out and was found in the middle

of the west meadow, grazing next to the sheep.'

'Oh dear,' said Lady Anne, 'that was very careless of the stable hands.'

'It certainly was. I've a mind to take it further. Can't have a valuable horse allowed to wander off at will. He must have got into the vegetable garden, for the gardener says something got in there today and ate every last green bean.'

'Oh dear,' said Lady Anne again, putting down her embroidery. 'No green beans? Then there will be none of your favourite chutney this year. That *is* vexing.'

'Seems all your pansies were eaten too, my dear,' said Mr. Darcy.

'Oh dear! I helped plant those myself!'

Fitzwilliam felt dreadful. He wished he could unwish the events of the day, but he was sure that turning back time was too powerful a thing for his one remaining little wish to manage.

'But what else did you do today?' Lady Anne asked her son, when she had recovered from her dismay over the loss of chutney and pansies.

Fitzwilliam squirmed again. 'I . . . um . . . went down to the river with George.'

'Dear George,' said Lady Anne. 'Such a sweet boy. Such an open nature. I am sure he is very good for you, Fitzwilliam. His happy manners will draw you out.'

'And he's coming along excellently at fencing,' added Mr. Darcy. 'Has good form, good spirit. You could learn a thing or two from him, Fitzwilliam; you're a little stiff in your stance.' He turned to his wife. 'I think, dear, that I might arrange for young George Wickham to share in all of Fitzwilliam's lessons. Raise him up a bit. And arrange for a horse of his own so he can go out with Fitzwilliam, seeing as he's proving to be worthy company for him. What say you to that, Fitzwilliam?'

Fitzwilliam could only nod in reply, unable to say what he really thought of George Wickham at that moment in time.

GEORGE TURNED up next morning for his fencing lesson. There was an air of coolness between the boys, and the lunges that morning were particularly aggressive so that Sir Lambrey had to break them up more than once.

They sat in stony silence all through lessons and ate their noontime dinner with their backs to one another.

George finally broke the silence.

‘I see the brute got back to the stables.’

‘No thanks to you. You didn’t help find him.’

‘I would have made a wish for him to be found,’ said George.

‘Why didn’t you?’

George sighed heavily. ‘Mother got hold of my wishes.’

‘How did she know they were wishes?’

‘She wanted to know where I got my new shirt, and when she wouldn’t believe I didn’t steal it, I showed her I got it by a wish, by wishing my dinner was twice as big, and it did grow twice as big—you should’ve seen it. It was mutton pasty as well!’ He grinned in the old way, but Fitzwilliam did not smile back.

‘What did she do with them?’

‘Wasted them. Wished for a new gown. A wish for the skirt, and another for the bodice, and then she wished it all a different colour, and then more wishes on ribbons and lace and stuff, and by the time she got her new gown, all the wishes were gone.’

‘I’m glad they’re gone,’ said Fitzwilliam.

George sighed again. ‘She sent me out to find the old woman to get some more, but I looked all over and couldn’t find her.’

‘Good,’ said Fitzwilliam flatly.

‘Shall we go fishing after lessons?’ asked George presently.

Fitzwilliam did not answer.

‘Look, I didn’t mean it about wishing you a slimy toad, if that’s what you’re angry about,’ said George.

‘If you’d had a stronger wish, that’s exactly what you would have done.’

‘But I’d have wished you back again straight away.’

‘No, you wouldn’t. You’d have gone off and left me there.’

‘I would have come back, on my honour, I would. You can’t go fishing or fencing with a slimy toad. I’d have wished you back soon enough.’

Fitzwilliam was not appeased. It was not the betrayal of being turned into a toad that offended him; it was the dismay of his mother over her flowers and vegetable garden and the feeling that he had been deceitful to his father. A gentleman was never deceitful.

‘I know where there’s some early nuts to pick,’ said George. ‘Saw them when I was out looking for the old woman. I’ll show you.’

This was not enough of a conciliatory offer for Fitzwilliam. George tried again.

‘I saw a pike down at the river near the village. Biggest thing I’ve ever seen—a monster! We could try and catch him.’

Fitzwilliam half-turned his head towards George. ‘How big?’

George stretched out his arms as far as they would go.

A truce was made.

HOURS OF FREEDOM

The autumnal weeks moved towards winter, during which time there was much talk among the servants and estate workers of Pemberley. The talk was of the disappointing fact that the elusive wisewoman, who had brought a blessing to the estate for the past eight years, had now moved on, as good fairfolk were wont to do. The day the vegetable garden had been mysteriously ravaged marked the turning point in the fortunes of the estate. The crop and garden yields returned to normal, the animals ceased from bearing good, healthy litters, the bread rose no higher than it ought, and the butter resumed its ordinary shade of pale yellow. It was a shame, the servants and workers all agreed, a great pity. But it had been good while it lasted. If only they knew what it was that had displeased their spirit of bounty and sent her away.

‘MY HEAD IS GOING to burst if I have to memorise any more Latin verbs!’ cried George one wintry afternoon. ‘Let’s go down to the kitchens and see what we can get to eat.’

‘We promised we’d work at them till dinner,’ said Fitzwilliam.

‘Come on, it’s baking day,’ urged George.

That settled it. Fitzwilliam could not resist the pleasures of baking day any more than any other nine-year-old boy.

‘We’d best be quick,’ said Fitzwilliam. ‘Master Tyndall will be back soon.’

‘Race you then,’ said George, and he darted towards the stairway that led down to the kitchens.

‘Why, Master Fitzwilliam and young George,’ said the pastry cook, giving Fitzwilliam a floury bob of greeting. ‘What are you pair doing in my kitchen?’

‘Come to see what that wonderful smell is,’ said George, sniffing the air.

‘That’s the master’s fruit cake, and the mistress’s jam tarts.’

‘Jam tarts! You make the best jam tarts in all the kingdom, Mrs. Pepperwort.’ George gave her a winning smile. It worked, as it always did. She tutted at him and called him a charmer and a knave and gave them a small tart each to take away.

‘Thank you,’ Fitzwilliam said politely, and she bobbed politely in reply, while George hugged her round her middle and made her laugh as she pushed him away.

George bolted his tart down before Fitzwilliam had taken two bites of his. Then he grinned and pulled out another tart from under his tunic.

‘Did Pepperwort give you two?’ asked Fitzwilliam.

‘No.’

‘You stole it?’

‘What if I did? You want half?’

Fitzwilliam shook his head. There was no pleasure in a stolen tart that had been made for his mother.

‘Suit yourself.’

‘Where are you going?’ asked Fitzwilliam, as George veered off towards the door to the gardens.

‘I’ve had enough lessons for one day,’ said George. ‘Tell old Tyndall I’ve been taken ill, unless you want to come for some tree climbing?’

That was a tempting thought. But Fitzwilliam had promised his father he would never skip lessons again.

‘Didn’t think so. You’re such a bore sometimes, Fitz.’ And George ran off.

Though Fitzwilliam was often a ‘bore,’ and George was often doing what he liked and not doing what he disliked, yet there were many happy hours of pleasure and freedom enjoyed by the unlikely playmates during their childhood. George was not always causing trouble for Darcy. He was a lively companion who brightened up Fitzwilliam’s days, and he seemed genuinely fond of Fitzwilliam’s parents, bringing Lady Anne little bunches

of violets or sweetpeas on occasion, and showing only his happy manners to Mr. Darcy, with no hint of the rebellion or resentment that Fitzwilliam sometimes glimpsed.

The boys joined Mr. Wickham and Mr. Darcy some days, riding about the estate, learning about crop rotation and drainage, and talking to the head shepherd and reeve and all the other men under Mr. Wickham. They joined in on their first hunt when they were nine; Mr. Darcy had a hunting coat and hat and a pair of long boots made up for George to match Fitzwilliam's. George could not have been more pleased to strut about in his leather boots. Fitzwilliam could not have been more pleased to shoot his first pheasant. His pleasure was not in the limp bird the dog brought back, but in the pride in his father's eyes.

Spring blossomed into summer, and the best weeks of the year came when lessons ceased, and fishing in the river and swimming in the lake took the place of arithmetic and declensions. Cousins John and Henrietta were coming for a summer visit, and the house was busy with preparations for them. Aunt Arabella was the daughter of a duke, though she had only married Lady Anne's brother, who was but an earl, and an earl who was not nearly as rich as Mr. Darcy. Cousin Audley was not coming, for he was fourteen now and too grown up for summer holidays. He must work at his studies and learn all about managing his father's estate, which was to be his inheritance.

Aunt Catherine and Cousin Anne rarely visited, for Aunt Catherine despised having to stay at inns on the journey. She declared that one could never get a wholesome meal nor good bedding in an inn, and to add to the displeasures of travelling, there was the fact of Anne being rather frail in health ever since her bad case of scarlet fever.

'I suppose you won't care about riding out and fishing with me when your cousin John comes,' said George when he heard the news of the visit.

'You can come with us, just the same as always,' said Fitzwilliam.

'Mother says I won't be wanted once the grand relations come to stay. Says I'll be cast off and not picked up again till they're gone. Says you won't think I'm good enough when you've got an earl's son to go about with.'

'I don't know why your mother said that,' said Fitzwilliam. 'John will like to come with us. He's good at fishing. He caught eight trout once when he came last year. He's going to join the king's men, you know. He does

sword fighting, not just fencing. He jumped the hedge in the east meadow last year on his horse.'

'Sounds like a show-off,' said George. 'I hate him.'

'He's not a show-off. And you don't even know him, so how can you hate him?'

'I hate him, 'cause he's coming here to lord it over us and spoil everything!'

Fitzwilliam didn't understand George's outburst and could think of nothing more to say in John's defence other than that he was a really good shot with a sling. He could knock down a crow from half a field away. But George seemed disgusted at hearing that and ran off, leaving Fitzwilliam alone on top of the haystacks they had been climbing in the barn.

COUSIN HENRIETTA WAS ONLY four and not terribly interesting, but Cousin John was a tall, strong lad of eleven, and Fitzwilliam was always glad to see him and a little in awe of him on account of his advanced horse-riding and swordsmanship. Fitzwilliam was looking forward to showing John that he rode a horse now and not a pony, as he had done last time the cousins visited.

He stood beside his mother, watching the horses and carriage travelling up the long entrance path. Aunt Arabella's carriage rumbled up first, flanked by a pair of attendants. Her lady's maid, little Henrietta, and Henrietta's nurse were in the carriage. Next came Cousin John, looking very fine on his chestnut road horse. Mr. Darcy had sent six of his men to meet his sister-in-law and her children as an escort on the second half of their journey, and they rode up in the rear.

Lady Anne went forward to greet Lady Arabella when she had alighted from the handsome carriage.

'My dear Arabella, how wonderful to see you. And look at my darling niece, how she has grown! You will be on your own pony next summer, Henrietta. John—what a handsome young man you are becoming. Come inside and take refreshment; you must be weary after such a journey.'

Fitzwilliam bowed to his aunt and was stared at by Henrietta. He shook hands with John, feeling suddenly awkward, as though John were a stranger and not his summer playmate. But the shyness soon wore off when John asked how he liked his new mare, and they followed the attendants to the

stables to look at her properly and for Fitzwilliam to show off Paloma proudly.

‘Who’s that, Fitzwilliam?’ asked John.

Fitzwilliam turned his head to see George peering over the stable door. Fitzwilliam beckoned him over. ‘This is George,’ he told his cousin.

‘A stable hand?’ asked John.

‘No. The steward’s son.’

‘Oh. The steward’s son,’ said John in a way that made it sound as though George were of no more importance than if he were a stable hand.

‘I’m not the steward’s son,’ said George, coming forward.

Fitzwilliam looked at him in surprise.

‘Then who are you?’ asked John in such a grown-up voice that Fitzwilliam was amazed that George was brave enough to answer him. But George was not afraid of anyone.

‘I’m Mr. Darcy’s godson,’ said George loftily.

‘I never heard of my uncle having any godsons, besides me and Audley,’ said John. Fitzwilliam could tell that John did not like a younger boy talking to him the way George did. ‘I think you’re a lying stable hand.’

‘You just ask him, then,’ said George, standing with his hands on his hips. ‘He’s educating me and everything. He told my father he was taking me on as a godson. And if you call me a liar or a stable hand again, you’ll be sorry.’

‘Oh, will I now!’ John pushed his sleeves up his arms as though he were getting ready to use his fists. ‘You just come here and say that again to my face!’

George rolled his own sleeves back, and Fitzwilliam was about to warn George that John was really good at wrestling and he shouldn’t try and fight him, when a childish voice called out, ‘Found you!’

It was Cousin Henrietta, coming in with her nurse. When Henrietta had been shown Paloma and had finished petting her, George was nowhere to be seen, and the party went up to the house for dinner.

Despite the unpropitious first meeting between George Wickham and John, George did frequently join the cousins on their fishing and shooting and swimming ventures. John was a little aloof with George as though to remind him that he was his superior, but he was otherwise tolerant of him.

‘I asked Mama if that George was Uncle Darcy’s godson,’ John told Fitzwilliam. ‘She asked Uncle Darcy about it, and Uncle Darcy said that he

was a kind of godson. Not an official one at birth, but a kind of adopted one. He said he was born the same day as you. You're birthday twins, though you're nothing like him.'

'No,' said Fitzwilliam glumly. 'George does what he likes and gets everyone to like him.'

'Not me,' said John. 'I think there's something cocksure about him. I don't like him. But Mama says it's a good thing for you to have some company of your own age, you not having any brothers or sisters to play with, so she made me promise to be friendly to him. And I've not called him out for a fight the whole time I've been here, have I?'

'No,' agreed Fitzwilliam. 'Not even when he kept shooting at the pheasants you spied first.'

'He missed them all, though, didn't he?' said John with great satisfaction.

LOST FOREVER

The tenth birthday of George and Fitzwilliam came to pass, followed, as is the usual order of things, by their eleventh and twelfth. They grew taller. They progressed from verb memorisation to essay composition and from gentle cantering to hard galloping. They came home from the seasonal hunts feeling pleased with their success and their advancement into the world of men, having left all such childish things as hunting for tree sprites far behind them.

It was during their twelfth summer that Fitzwilliam began to be aware that something secretive was happening in his home, and it chiefly concerned his mother. Aunt Arabella stayed longer than usual that summer and was frequently heard exhorting Lady Anne to take care not to walk too far about the gardens and not to eat too many of the pickled beetroot for they would give a sour disposition, nor too many of the sweetmeats, for they would give a lethargic temperate. Fitzwilliam wondered that his mother should smile and accede to such nonsense from Aunt Arabella. But accede she did, sitting sedately in the garden, abandoning her walks and rides, taking care to eat plain food, and putting a hand to her middle very frequently and smiling quietly to herself.

It was George who enlightened Fitzwilliam as to the meaning of all these things. They were lying on the freshly cut grass near the lake, drying off after a swim. Cousin John lay with his hat over his face to shield it from the strong sun.

‘I heard my ma say that your ma is breeding,’ George remarked casually.

‘What?’ said Fitzwilliam, looking up from his scrutiny of a line of ants in the grass.

‘You know . . . spawning. Producing. In the family way. You must know what I mean, Fitz; you can’t be such a numbskull as that!’

‘Hey,’ said John, lifting up his hat. ‘Watch your tongue, Wickham.’

George pulled a face at John once his hat dropped back down.

It was clear by Fitzwilliam’s face that some kind of understanding was dawning upon him. ‘Is it true, John?’ he asked, turning to his cousin.

John lifted up his hat again. ‘I have heard Mother dropping hints about it. Thought you would have guessed by now, Darcy, seeing as your mother is rather round about the middle.’

Fitzwilliam hadn’t guessed till now.

George elbowed him and said conspiratorially, ‘Do you how it happens? Jackson in the stables told me. The fellow has to talk the girl into going up to the west meadow, or in the hay barn if it’s cold, and then he gets her to —’

‘Shut up, George,’ said Fitzwilliam, pushing George away. ‘I don’t want to hear anything that came out of Jackson’s filthy mouth.’

‘You’re such a prig, Fitz. Jackson says Bessie Flaunt in the dairy will let any fellow take her to the west meadow if he gives her a present. I’m going to see if she’ll let me.’

John sat up, putting his hat back on his head. He looked at his cousin and said with some sympathy, ‘You’ll have to get used to listening to pigswill, Darcy; you’ll hear a lot worse when you go away to school.’ He cast a withering look at George. ‘You’ll fit right in, Wickham.’

THE PREPARATIONS for going away to school later that autumn took the form of lots of new clothes and boots being made up. A new trunk arrived with Fitzwilliam’s initials studded into the lid, and slowly over the weeks of summer, the trunk was filled as the seamstresses and tailors finished his many necessary outfits and sent them on. Mr. Darcy was sponsoring George’s education and had not only been generous enough to pay for George’s fees at the same exclusive school as Fitzwilliam was to attend, but he also paid for George to have the required clothes and articles made up.

‘What a fine man your father is,’ said George, gloating over the folded pile of silk cravats that had been added to his own trunk. ‘Best man in the world.’ He pulled on a pair of neatly stitched kid gloves. ‘Turning me into a real gent, isn’t he?’

‘My mother says a real gentleman is seen by his manners, not by his clothes,’ said Fitzwilliam. Sometimes he was glad that his father had near-enough adopted George as a brother for himself. They’d shared a lot of larks and fun over the years. But sometimes George made him feel uneasy, as though there were differences between them that could not be reconciled, though he could not say exactly what those differences were.

THE END OF SUMMER CAME. The cousins left. John would be going away to begin his full military training now that he was fourteen. He would not be returning to spend any more summers with his cousin again.

Aunt Arabella left very reluctantly; she wanted to stay with Lady Anne to be there when ‘her time’ came. But she must travel home while the roads were dry and the air warm, and there were all the preparations to be made for John before he was sent off to become one of the king’s men. Eight-year-old Henrietta waved goodbye from the carriage, and Fitzwilliam watched them leave, feeling a sudden lump come up in his throat because suddenly everything was changing. John would be gone, and he wouldn’t see him again for a very long time, and he would be leaving home himself in two weeks to go to school. A new baby was coming, which would change things at home; already he felt the attention he had enjoyed from his parents diverted away to their expectation of this new child. He was glad in that moment that George would be going to school with him. At least there would be one familiarity still in his life.

A WEEK after Aunt Arabella left, the physician was called to attend upon Lady Anne. Fitzwilliam watched the bustle as maids with piles of towels and bowls of steaming water hurried up to their mistress’s chamber, looking excited and whispering to all the servants they passed that ‘the mistress was in her time.’

Mr. Darcy paced up and down the hall outside his wife's chambers, asking everyone who came out of her chamber if there were any news and if all was well.

It seemed to Fitzwilliam that the business was going on a terribly long time. He tried to occupy himself with a book, keeping the door of the library open so he could hear who was coming and going, but it was hard to concentrate with so much distraction. One of the servants came in with a tray of food.

'Mrs. Reynolds said to bring you a tray,' said the maid. 'For the master ain't dining in the hall tonight on account of the mistress.' She curtsied and left him alone with his meal.

Afterwards he wandered outside for a walk, and then wandered back. No one had any news to tell him. He returned to the library, where a fire had been lit. He lay down on the rug before the fireplace; the fire's crackling, moving flames were the closest thing to company he could find that evening.

He must have fallen asleep on the rug. Someone had covered him over with a blanket. Something had woken him. The fire was ashen, and the faint light from the window was that of dawn. Despite the early hour, he could hear the sound of raised voices. There were footsteps running up the stairs in the hall, and he ventured out to investigate.

'Oh, young master!' cried a voice. It was the housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds. 'I was coming to find you.' She looked agitated and dreadful, as though she'd had no sleep.

'What's happening?' asked Fitzwilliam, rubbing his bleary eyes. 'Is Mother well?'

To his astonishment, Mrs. Reynolds burst into tears. 'Oh, young master,' she cried between sobs. 'Oh, my poor young master, my poor mistress!'

Fitzwilliam would not wait to hear any more; something was very wrong. He ran towards the hall, up the long staircase two steps at a time, running and running until he reached his mother's chambers, pushing past his mother's maid who was making an awful wailing noise, past the black-gowned physician who looked grim and grave. He came to a standstill when he reached his father at the side of his mother's bed.

His father looked down at him with red-rimmed eyes. 'Fitzwilliam, my son, you must be brave. Your poor, dear mother is gone.'

THE APPEARANCE OF GOODNESS

Fitzwilliam barged into his bedchamber, flung open the lid of a chest, scrabbled furiously for a small box, tipped out its contents on the floor, and snatched up what he had been looking for. He held up the small, silvery disc: his last wish. He gripped it tightly, then opened his hand so it sat on his shaking palm. His voice sounded strange to his own ears: it was rough and cracked.

‘I wish that my mother would live!’

He knew he was asking something enormous of so small a wish, but he focused every fibre of his being into the wish lying in his hand. His whole soul willed his wish to happen—it had to happen—his mother could not be dead!

But nothing happened. The wish did not disappear, and he cast it from him with a cry of anguish, then threw himself to the floor, sobbing violently. The wish rolled under the chest and was gone from sight.

MRS. REYNOLDS BROUGHT Fitzwilliam a tray of breakfast. ‘Try and eat, young master,’ she said in a sorrowful voice. ‘Your mother wouldn’t wish to see you so distressed.’ It was clear from her face that she had been crying herself.

‘Don’t say the word “wish” to me,’ said Fitzwilliam hoarsely. He remained lying on the floor, curled up tightly.

‘Your mother left a word for you, young master,’ she said gently. ‘Her maid promised it would be passed on to you.’

Fitzwilliam lifted his tousled, dark head. 'What word?'

'She asked that you would take care of your sister. That was her dying wish.'

'Sister?'

'Saints alive, did you not know?' asked Mrs. Reynolds, still keeping her voice soft despite her surprise. 'You've a sister. Your mother named her Georgiana, after your father. Poor, dear, little motherless mite.' The housekeeper gave a little sniff. 'Poor little mite will want all the looking after she can get, now that she has no mother.' She pulled out a damp handkerchief, dabbed her eyes, and blew her nose. 'Young Wickham is outside. Come to see if he can cheer you, bless his heart.'

Fitzwilliam stood before the cradle with George beside him. Georgiana Darcy was as small and wrinkly and red as Cousin Anne had been when Fitzwilliam had looked at her all those years ago. But one small hand had worked loose from the tightly wrapped shawl about her, and Fitzwilliam marvelled at such tiny fingers stretching and curling into a fist. He decided that this was no ugly baby, such as Cousin Anne had been. This was a remarkable baby to whom he had been given the responsibility of a brother. He touched the little hand and whispered, 'I promise I'll always look after you, just as Mother wished.'

George bent over the cradle to look at her. 'I'll be good to you too,' he promised.

GOING AWAY to school was not delayed, for Mr. Darcy considered it would be better for his son to be kept busy and be among lively schoolfellows rather than in a house heavy with mourning.

The servants talked and murmured that it was a terrible shame that the good spirit that had watched over them all had been chased away some years past. If only the wisewoman had not left them, the mistress would not have died, and the master would not be going about as though he'd aged ten years in one day. It was a terrible pity.

Fitzwilliam felt it was a double blow to be sent away at such a time. But he would not attempt to argue with his father over the matter, for his father seemed strangely weak and broken at that time. Aunt Catherine was due to arrive any day to oversee the care of baby Georgiana and to 'succour' her brother-in-law in his grief. To be succoured by Aunt Catherine was not a

prospect Fitzwilliam felt able to endure, and so he submitted quietly to being sent away to school.

THE SCHOOL YEARS PASSED QUICKLY. Little Georgiana grew up without knowing what the care of a mother was, but having many mothers among the nursery and household servants. The same servants pronounced Master Fitzwilliam taller and handsomer and cleverer at his every visit home from school. The shedding of all childhood ways, and the aristocratic manners that replaced them, was exactly what they desired of their young master.

‘A LETTER FROM MASTER FITZWILLIAM?’ enquired Hodson, Mr. Darcy’s valet.

‘Yes,’ murmured Mr. Darcy, his eyes quickly scanning the neat rows of handwriting. ‘His studies are going well. He received a commendation for a piece of translation work, and his tutor wants him to enter for some oratory prize.’

‘He’s a credit to you, sir,’ said Hodson, laying out his master’s riding clothes.

‘Yes. He is.’ Mr. Darcy unfolded a second letter and began reading it. He gave a little chuckle now and again until he reached the end of the short missive. ‘This is from Wickham’s boy. Always takes the trouble to let me know how he’s doing. Hardly a boy, now; he and Fitzwilliam will be eighteen next month.’ He gave a sigh as he put the letter down. ‘Where have the years gone, Hodson?’

Hodson made a sympathetic noise of agreement.

‘Wickham’s boy is a rare young man, Hodson. I sometimes wish Fitzwilliam had some of his spirit. Fitzwilliam’s letters are all facts and formality, but young George—he knows how to write so as to bring a smile to one’s face. Such happy manners.’

‘Young George Wickham does not bear the future responsibility of the grandest estate in the north of the kingdom, sir,’ said Hodson. ‘Master Fitzwilliam’s gravity is most desirable. A responsible young man is a wise

young man.’ Hodson had been Mr. Darcy’s valet for enough decades to be able to speak quite freely to his master.

‘Yes. I daresay there’s something in what you say, Hodson. But I’m very fond of young George. His father has been invaluable to me over the years and has kept all things in good order—my veritable right-hand man. I’m glad to be doing something for his boy, help him along, advance him. Very glad.’

‘Your patronage of the boy has been beyond generous,’ murmured Hodson as he brushed down his master’s coat.

‘They’ll be off to the university after the summer,’ said Mr. Darcy. ‘I wonder what profession young George ought to be helped into. I have been thinking he would do well in the church. He could have the living at Kympton when it comes up. The rectory there is comfortable. Had a deal of improvements made to it in recent years. Good pasture and land. Profitable farm attached. He would do very well there. What think you, Hodson?’

Since Lady Anne’s death six years ago, Hodson had become the chief recipient of all Mr. Darcy’s ideas and musings. But what Hodson thought about young Wickham being set up as a local rector was not something he could readily repeat before his master. Images of young Wickham drinking himself into a state of oblivion with the estate workers, who were likewise inclined to drink more than was good for them, came to his mind. Young Wickham coming out of the hay barns with Bessie Flaunt from the dairy, tucking in his shirt and pulling straw from his rumpled hair was another image that Hodson found hard to reconcile with that of a sober, chaste clergyman. Young Wickham and his dice, bringing grief to his father over another gambling debt. These were Hodson’s thoughts as he gave his master’s boots one last buff.

‘IT’S A SAD DAY, MRS. REYNOLDS,’ said Hodson to the housekeeper as they had their usual evening tipple together that evening, ‘when a father prefers a knavish whippersnapper over a fine, upright fellow.’

Mrs. Reynolds knew exactly what her colleague was referring to. ‘Has the master had another pair of letters?’

Hodson nodded and gazed meditatively into his glass.

‘Mrs. Wickham had a letter from that son of hers this day,’ she informed Hodson. ‘She told all about it to Madley, who told it to me. Young

Wickham does claim that our Master Fitzwilliam hates every moment at that school of his but won't say a word of it to his father, for he wouldn't displease him for the world.'

'Well, he was always a quiet, serious young fellow, was our young master, and he's grown more serious since the death of the mistress. The only time I ever see a smile on him is when he's with his sister. It wouldn't surprise me that he doesn't get on with the clamour and the rascallions of a large school.'

'Young Wickham will fit right in with the rascallions,' observed Mrs. Reynolds. 'He could charm rain clouds away with that silver-tongue and ready smile of his.' She gave a little shake of her head so that her cap ribbons rippled. 'I hope he'll settle down and repay the master's kindness by doing well. I've no fears for our young master. I've never known a bad word or deed from him, for all he's called too serious or reserved. To my mind, a master that's not over-ready to laugh at the world makes a better one than the likes of young Wickham, who's too ready to laugh. He could go either way, that one.'

'Aye,' was Hodson's meditative reply.

THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE

‘Are you pleased with her, sir?’ asked the horse master.
‘Very,’ said Fitzwilliam, dismounting from his new horse in a graceful movement. He patted her glossy, dark neck and let the horse master take her reins.

Fitzwilliam followed them into the stables and petted his old mare. ‘Don’t look so dejected, Paloma,’ he said. ‘You’re not abandoned. You’ll soon have a new rider.’ He called over to the horse master in the next stall. ‘Miss Darcy may begin riding Paloma. She’s gentle enough for her, and though Miss Darcy is young, she’s tall for her age and ready to progress.’

‘Yes, sir,’ called back the horse master. ‘Young mistress has come along wondrous on her pony. I’d agree she’s ready for her first horse, and there’s none so gentle as old Paloma. She served you well many a year.’

‘That she did.’ Fitzwilliam gave her another pat. ‘With one exception of disgrace in the vegetable gardens,’ he murmured.

Fitzwilliam found eleven-year-old Georgiana out on the lawn playing boules with George. They made a cheerful scene.

‘I’m winning!’ she called out, seeing her brother crossing the grounds. ‘I’ve beaten George three games out of five!’

‘She has no mercy on me; she’s as ruthless as an empress,’ said George, deliberately throwing his boule so that it did not compete with Georgiana’s.

‘How do you like your new horse?’ George asked.

‘Very well,’ said Fitzwilliam.

‘Must be a delightful thing to be able to buy oneself a pedigree mount whenever one so desires,’ said George. He was smiling, but Fitzwilliam did

not miss the tang of sarcasm in his voice. He chose to ignore it.

‘I’ve told Marshall you may have Paloma,’ Fitzwilliam informed his sister.

‘Oh, thank you!’ cried Georgiana, dropping her boule and rushing to take hold of her brother’s hand with both of hers. ‘I love dear old Paloma; I’ve been longing to ride her. Petal has grown too small!’

‘Petal is as small as she ever was. It’s you who have grown too tall,’ said Fitzwilliam. He looked down at her, and the smile in his eyes dimmed into something mixed with melancholy as he said, ‘You are going to be a tall young lady, just like mother was.’

Georgiana spun away to finish her game.

THE TWENTY-THIRD SUMMER of Fitzwilliam and George was a busy one. Fitzwilliam was occupied in accompanying his father in his duties. On Fitzwilliam’s return from university that summer, he’d been shocked by the sight of his father. He thought his father had aged greatly since he had last seen him. He was thinner, his fine-boned cheeks were hollow, his dark, serious eyes were dull and weary-looking, and his clothes hung upon him as though his tailor had taken his measurements too wide.

Fitzwilliam spoke to Hodson and Reynolds about his father; Hodson had looked stricken as he told of how he could persuade the master to receive neither the surgeon nor the apothecary. Reynolds looked equally grieved as she told of how she made sure Cook sent up all manner of strengthening broths and puddings for the master, but he barely ate anything. Fitzwilliam determined to take on all the burden of the estate affairs that his father might be free to rest. But his father would not rest. He seemed to burn with a nervous energy, and he wanted to show his son every intricacy of the accounts and doings of the house and estates. It was as though he felt that time was running out, and he must pass on all that he knew to his son and heir.

‘Never forget who you are,’ he urged his son one morning in his study chamber. ‘You are a Darcy foremost, and a Fitzwilliam. You are marked out for greatness, and you are entrusted with the highest responsibility—that of men’s livelihoods. You set the tone and the example wherever you go. You

represent good stewardship and justice; you uphold the law of the land. You must hold your head high, for you are among the higher echelons of our kingdom. Never forget it!’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Fitzwilliam, reflecting his father’s gravity. ‘I will not forget it.’

‘You will watch over your sister,’ said Mr. Darcy.

‘Of course, sir.’

‘You will guard her honour. You will protect her from fortune hunters. You will ensure she does not marry beneath her station.’

‘Her honour is as my honour, sir.’

‘John will help you. I have appointed him joint guardian over her. I have spoken to him of it, and he has agreed.’

‘Very good, sir. But there will be no need of guardians. You will be her guardian until she is of an age and inclination to marry.’

Fitzwilliam felt something heavy press upon him as he said these words. His father met his eyes, and in their wordless look they each saw the painful truth. Mr. Darcy was dying, and he would not live to see his daughter’s wedding.

‘I should like young Wickham to have the Kympton living if he chooses to take orders,’ Mr. Darcy said, leaning back in his chair as though he felt some relief at having unburdened his heart’s wishes to his son. ‘Or, should he choose another profession, I would see him advanced in whatever sphere he enters, though it is my hope that he will take orders.’

‘Yes, sir. Just as you choose.’ Fitzwilliam hesitated. Should he speak to his father regarding his concerns over George taking holy orders? George had barely escaped being dishonourably thrown out of university on two occasions in their last term: once for gambling, and once for being caught smuggling a woman out of his bedchamber. Fitzwilliam had not spoken a word of either incident to his father. But such behaviour did not bode well for a future rector on their estate. His father had closed his eyes as though his impassioned talk had wearied him, and Fitzwilliam decided he would raise the issue another day, when his father was stronger.

That day did not come. Mr. Darcy passed away peacefully in his sleep that night and was buried by the new master of Pemberley three days later.

‘I’M AN ORPHAN,’ said Georgiana, sitting red-eyed among her mother’s rose garden. Only a few late roses clung to the thorny bushes. Crimson, scarlet, and pink petals strewed the earth beneath.

‘You have me,’ said Fitzwilliam. ‘I will be as brother and father to you. As will Cousin John.’

‘And George,’ added Georgiana.

‘Yes,’ said Fitzwilliam without enthusiasm. Of late, he had wondered if George was fit to be a close companion to Georgiana. The thought of George’s vices sullyng his little sister was abhorrent. But Georgiana loved George as a brother. And to do George some credit, he had always been good with her and had devoted long hours to her amusement. So long as he never let his indiscretions come near her, he would be permitted to remain the happy-mannered, brotherly friend that Georgiana felt him to be to her.

There had been coolness between the friends since the incident at university over the young woman. George had laughed it off and called Fitzwilliam a prude. There was not a young man in the whole university who did not enjoy the company of young ladies, except, that is, Fitzwilliam, or Darcy as he was known among his peers.

‘Plenty of men don’t stoop to such behaviour,’ Fitzwilliam retorted.

‘Plenty more do,’ argued George.

‘You bring disgrace to the name of Darcy by acting in such a way. Everyone knows you’re under my father’s patronage, and you dishonour his name by spending the money he gives you on gambling and behaving as you do.’

George had flared red with anger. ‘You’re insufferable, Darcy! You and your family pride! Just because you like to live your life as a cold, buttoned-up prig doesn’t mean I have to—I’m as good as the next man, and your father’s proud of me! I suppose that’s what you hate, isn’t it? Because he likes me above you, and why does he like me above you? Because I’m not a dismal, fusty drear!’

Fitzwilliam would not give him the satisfaction of responding. He felt too old for exchanging childish insults. A few days later, George had apologised and half-promised to quit gambling and other illicit distractions and concentrate on his studies. An uneasy truce was made, but the angry words had soured the air between them.

GEORGE HAD BEEN VERY good following Mr. Darcy's death. He'd been a comfort to Georgiana and had been one of the coffin bearers at the funeral. But Fitzwilliam had noticed his disappointment at the reading of his father's will, despite George having been left a large sum of money. Fitzwilliam rode down to the steward's house next morning to speak to him on the matter. He felt obliged to assure George that he would respect his father's wishes regarding the advancement of George's career.

Mr. Wickham had taken ill shortly after his master, so after asking after him, Fitzwilliam left the cottage. He and George wandered out through the meadow between the steward's house and the stream that flowed down to the river, where they had spent so many happy childhood afternoons with their fishing lines.

'I wanted to talk to you about the future,' Fitzwilliam began. 'My father wished you to have the living at Kympton, should you choose to accept it.'

'Should I choose to accept it?' echoed George. 'Why would I not choose to accept it? Why would I turn down such a handsome living?' He said the word 'handsome' in a sarcastic tone.

'You're not pleased with the living?' Fitzwilliam asked, picking up on the sarcasm. 'You don't have to take orders, if there's another profession you wish to pursue.'

George shrugged. 'It's a good living,' he acknowledged. 'It was generous of your father to wish me to have it. He was always good to me. It's just . . .' He looked around, taking in the vast sweep of the grounds beyond the meadow and the stream and the woodlands; as far as the eye could see, it was Pemberley land. 'He often told me I was like a son to him. I suppose I thought his will might reflect that.'

'A good living is exactly what a second son would expect,' said Fitzwilliam, not unkindly. 'Or did you think you were like a firstborn to him?'

George gave a wry laugh. 'Who is the eldest of us, Darcy? My father tells me I was born at milking time. You don't get much earlier in the day than that. The money your father left me was generous, but it was a thirtieth part of what was left to Georgiana. Therefore I may conclude that I was not truly as a son to him.'

Fitzwilliam was wavering between indignation at George's ingratitude and the desire not to speak harsh words to him while his father lay desperately ill. He decided not to comment on the sum of money left to

George. 'As to who is the eldest,' he said, 'I don't know the answer. And I cannot ask either of my parents that question.'

'Plumtree will know,' said George. 'Not that it matters.' He kicked at a stone on the ground. 'I do miss him,' he said in a quieter voice.

Fitzwilliam felt himself soften a degree. 'Then do him proud, George. Finish your studies, get ordained, start acting like a clergyman ought, and take up the position my father wanted you to have. I will honour his wishes by covering all the expenses.'

George gave another stone a kick. 'Very well,' he said, his usual good-natured smile returning to his handsome face. 'I will.'

'Good. I'm glad.' But Fitzwilliam still felt a niggling uneasiness.

VILLAINOUS CONDUCT

The new master of Pemberley did not fail in his responsibilities to his inherited estates. Twelve-year-old Georgiana was doing very well under her governess, Mrs. Younge, and the benevolent eye of the family nursemaid, Plumtree. She was making such good progress in her harp and piano playing that her brother promised she should go to London that autumn to begin studying under a master. Meanwhile, she lived a comfortable but quiet life at Pemberley. Cousin Henrietta visited, but Georgiana declared Henrietta so grown up that she was a little in awe of her. Cousin Anne did not visit, for her health would not permit the journey.

‘THE MASTER SHOULD BE LOOKING ABOUT for a wife,’ Hodson said to Mrs. Reynolds many an evening as they sat over their glasses of wine. ‘That would give the young mistress the benefit of a good lady to watch over her and educate her in the ways that young ladies need educating in.’

‘He’s barely of age,’ said Mrs. Reynolds, who knew many unsettling tales of how households could be turned upside down and inside out when a new mistress came in. Things went along very smoothly at Pemberley at present.

‘He’s three and twenty,’ argued Hodson. ‘He’s finished his education. It’s time he looked about him for a wife.’

‘You forget, Hodson,’ said the housekeeper, ‘that the master is betrothed to his cousin, Miss Anne. They’ve been betrothed since she was in her cradle.’

‘Pah,’ said Hodson, recalling the plain, sickly looking child that had visited once or twice. ‘She’s not fit to be mistress of Pemberley; she’s neither health nor beauty enough for it. The late master, bless his soul, often said that he wouldn’t wish Miss Anne on Master Fitzwilliam. A man needs a little bit of beauty to make swallowing down marriage a little easier.’

‘He never said that!’ said Mrs. Reynolds, unable to imagine the proud, upright late master talking in such a manner.

‘He said it many a time,’ insisted Hodson.

‘She’s the heiress to a great estate, is what she is,’ argued Mrs. Reynolds. ‘Uniting their estates would make him one of the richest men in the kingdom.’

‘If he were to marry his cousin, then why hasn’t the arrangements started?’

Mrs. Reynolds shrugged her matronly shoulders. ‘Who knows what the goings-on of these great men and ladies are. We’re just here to see that things run smoothly and to keep things just as they like them kept.’

Six months passed by, and there was not even a hint of a wedding between the master and his cousin. He only visited his Aunt Catherine’s house once a year, though Hodson could testify to there being a great many letters from the doughty Lady Catherine to her nephew.

Fitzwilliam divided his time between supervising the running of the estate and spending time in London during the winter months. The hunting seasons involved long visits to the manor houses of his old friends, new acquaintances, and family relatives.

George was close to completing his ordination, though he was rather vague in his communications with Fitzwilliam. He wrote regularly to supply Fitzwilliam with his list of expenses, and Fitzwilliam frowned over some of the bills presented to him. Did a student really require so many new coats and cravats? Were three pairs of boots really essential in a mere eight-month period? And what kind of a table did George keep that required such large tradesmen’s bills? The final insult was a bill from a hairdresser in the city with an annual bill equalling the value of a new horse! Fitzwilliam dashed off an angry letter to George, informing him that he was to send no more of his bills to Pemberley. From now on, he would be given a quarterly payment to cover all his living expenses until he took up his rectorship, and George must live within such means.

George returned to his father's house at regular intervals, but he managed to time his visits with Fitzwilliam's absences. Georgiana enjoyed his visits to Pemberley, writing to her brother of how kind George was to her, bringing her little trinkets, riding out with her, reading to her in the evenings, and making her and Plumtree laugh with his funny stories. He was so kind.

The time drew close for George to return to his childhood locality and take up the position of rector. He put off the appointment for a few months, writing to Fitzwilliam to say that he was going to undertake a bit of travelling before he settled down. But the summer before Wickham's return brought fresh concerns to Fitzwilliam regarding the suitability of George as a local rector.

There was an appeal to Fitzwilliam from a saddler in Lambton claiming that Mr. George Wickham had not paid for the new harness and saddle he'd had made when he was last in the country. Would Mr. Darcy look into it for him, for he was dearly out of pocket, having had to pay the tanner for the leather in advance?

An apothecary in Pemberley village enquired as to where he could send the overdue bill for Mr. George Wickham's account. He had taken a sizeable amount of ointment for his horse, having told the apothecary that he could get none so good, even in the city. And he'd had a goodly number of jars of powder for his complexion, and the apothecary's special blend of oils for the hair and whiskers.

A tavern keeper from Bakewell wished to enquire as to the whereabouts of a Mr. George Wickham, who had given the name of Pemberley as his address, in order to secure payment on a large amount of money owing from dice-playing. Fitzwilliam seethed over these unwelcome bills. He paid off the apothecary and saddler, for they were local men with families to support, but he refused to pay the gambling debt. He sent strong words to advise such creditors that from this day hence, no bills were to be sent to Pemberley. Mr. George Wickham was entirely responsible for his own debts, and Mr. Darcy would not be accountable for any more.

But the worst was yet to come. One early autumnal morning, the housekeeper knocked in a hesitant manner on the music room door, where Fitzwilliam was listening to Georgiana at the piano.

'Yes?' said Fitzwilliam, glancing up and seeing his housekeeper's uncomfortable look. No doubt there was some annoying domestic matter

going on in the kitchens.

‘If you please, sir,’ said Mrs. Reynolds with a curtsy. ‘There’s something very particular I should like to speak to you about.’

‘Speak,’ said Fitzwilliam, beckoning his housekeeper to come forward.

Mrs. Reynolds gave a significant look at Georgiana and said in a low voice, ‘If you please, sir, it’s a delicate matter.’

Fitzwilliam felt annoyed at being disturbed by ‘a delicate matter’ that was most likely related to a problem with the laundry or the miller’s supplies. Sometimes he wondered if his Aunt Arabella was right in her constant urging for him to find a wife and mistress of Pemberley. A mistress would take all of the petty household matters from his shoulders.

‘Excuse me,’ he said to Georgiana, getting up and following his housekeeper as she hurried outside the room.

‘If you please, sir,’ she began, still looking peculiar, ‘there’s been something left outside the house, and we none of us know what to do with it.’

‘Well, what is it?’

‘It’s . . . it’s . . . oh, sir, it’s . . . a *baby*.’

‘A baby?’

Mrs. Reynolds nodded and wrung her hands.

‘What do you mean when you say that a *baby* has been left outside the house?’

‘I mean, sir, that a baby’s been left outside the house.’

‘Where is its mother?’

‘I don’t know, sir. It were left with a note.’ She pulled something out of her apron pocket and held it out with her head bowed, feeling all the incongruity of not having a silver salver or tray on which she ought to give such a thing as a letter to the master. But then, this was a very incongruous letter.

Darcy took the small sheet of thick, rough-edged paper and unfolded it impatiently. He was aware of his housekeeper’s eyes watching him as he read the few words that were scrawled in a crude, almost illegible hand.

‘I can’t keep her. Her pa is G.W. He said he’d wed me but he didn’t.’

‘Her pa is G.W?’ Fitzwilliam read aloud, turning pale about the mouth and darker about the eyes.

Mrs. Reynolds nodded. ‘It mayn’t be true, sir,’ she said by way of defence. ‘A girl who has a babe out of wedlock can’t be relied upon to

speaking truth. She must be a bad girl to have done such a thing. It mayn't be true.'

'Show me,' said Fitzwilliam, sounding quiet but fierce.

He followed the housekeeper down to the kitchens and into her own parlour. A tiny baby lay swaddled in a shabby shawl, sleeping soundly.

'Poor mite was so hungry,' said Mrs. Reynolds. 'I dripped some milk into him till he stopped his mithering and fell asleep. But he needs a mother's milk, sir.'

Fitzwilliam stared at the sleeping bundle in a mixture of disbelief and disdain. 'There must be some way of finding the mother. Someone must know of a young woman in the country hereabouts who has just had a baby.'

'Maybe,' said Mrs. Reynolds. 'But young girls have ways of hiding such things if need be. And mayhap her family covered her and told her to take the child to its father. No family would allow their daughter to raise a child out of wedlock under their roof and under their neighbours' noses.'

'It can't stay here,' said Fitzwilliam, still looking a little stunned. 'What is to be done?' He turned to his housekeeper, suddenly looking more like the young boy she had watched grow up than the master of Pemberley.

'The head shepherd's wife might take him on and serve as a wet nurse. She'll require payment for her services, however.' She looked up at her master. 'You wouldn't want him staying here, not with Miss Darcy here, sir. And besides . . .' She looked apprehensively at the baby and lowered her voice. 'For all we know it might be a *changeling*.'

'None of that superstitious nonsense, Mrs. Reynolds. But my sister must not hear a word about this note. Not one word. Who else knows of this?'

'A good number of the servants know of the babe, sir, due to the crying the poor thing was making. But only Hodson and myself have seen the letter, sir. I found it tucked inside the babe's shawl, and I spoke to Hodson about it, for I wanted his advice as to what to do. But I haven't spoken a word of it to anyone else.'

'Good,' said Fitzwilliam, looking relieved. 'Do exactly as you have suggested, Mrs. Reynolds. Take it to the shepherd's wife and settle with her whatever she requires in payment.'

'Very good, sir.'

The following week, George returned home to take up his living as the new rector of Kympton.

A DISAPPOINTED MAN

George denied knowing anything about a baby. 'Would you take the word of some village trollop over mine?' he protested. 'A downright disgrace to link my name to some girl's illegitimate offspring. I'll have her sued for calumny if I find out who it is!'

Fitzwilliam wanted to believe him, wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, but there was no knowing what the truth of the matter was. His discreet enquiries into the villages about had yielded no information of any young woman who could have given birth recently. The baby's mother and her whereabouts remained a mystery.

'There may be gossip, George,' said Fitzwilliam. 'Regardless of what I think. These things have a habit of leaking out. How can I set you up as a local rector with such rumours flying about?'

'Well . . .' said George hesitantly, 'as it happens, I was intending to speak to you on the very subject of my *not* being set up as the local rector.' He twisted his hat between his hands and put on his most charming smile.

Fitzwilliam sat down at his desk near the window and motioned for George to take the chair opposite. George remained standing and began walking up and down before the desk. 'I've been thinking for some time that I'm not really cut out of the right cloth to be a man of the cloth.' He flashed a grin at his own pun, but Fitzwilliam looked stonily back at him. 'It takes a certain kind of a man. It's a calling, don't you think? And . . . I just haven't heard the call.' He grinned again.

'Did you even finish your studies?' asked Fitzwilliam. 'I know the money was advanced to you for all the fees. Did you pay them, or did you

spend it on other things?’ He spoke the last words bitterly.

George laughed. ‘Yes, yes,’ he said dismissively.

‘So what do you intend to do?’

‘I was thinking of going into the law. Now there’s a profession a man can be proud of, if a man has to have a profession. And it’s not my lot to be born into such wealth and splendour that I don’t need one.’ He waved a hand about the room, indicating the full-length velvet curtains at the windows, the polished walnut desk that Fitzwilliam sat behind, the paintings and tapestries on the wall above the carved panels. ‘I’m sure your father would have understood. He was an excellent man. He would have understood my conscientious qualms with regard to taking up a profession I am not called to.’

‘Is that so?’ said Fitzwilliam. ‘I’m not sure he would have considered your conscientious qualms to be in keeping with his ideas of duty and honour, and in keeping with the amount of money laid out in expenses thus far.’

‘You sound like my father,’ said George with a wry smile. He stopped pacing and stood looking down at his hat in his hands.

‘How is your father?’ asked Fitzwilliam in a softer tone. ‘I hear the physician has been calling upon him. I trust his health is recovering?’

‘Not really,’ said George, his voice softening also. ‘In truth, I think he has not long to live. I would say he has been slowly declining ever since Mr. Darcy’s death. I sometimes think the grief has struck him hard. They spent a good deal of time together. Rarely a day passed that they did not speak together at length on estate matters.’

‘I know. My father thought very highly of him. I would go so far as to say they were good friends. Your mother must be very worried for him.’

‘Yes, indeed. She never got over my not being made an independent gentleman. She had quite set her heart on that. Heaven only knows what will happen to her if Father dies.’

‘Your father was well paid; he must have laid up security for your mother in the event of his death.’

George shrugged. ‘I suppose my father would have laid up some security if my mother were not over fond of new gowns and shoes.’

‘If you had taken up the Kympton living, you would have had a comfortable home and sufficient income to provide for her in the event of her being widowed,’ Fitzwilliam said pointedly. But he spoke without

anger. There were too many memories of fathers and mothers roused up for him to feel anything but nostalgia at that moment.

‘So, about my going into the law,’ said George cautiously, as though he sensed Fitzwilliam’s lowered guard.

Fitzwilliam gazed out of the window for some moments, as though thinking hard. Finally he turned his dark eyes towards George’s hazel-brown ones. When Fitzwilliam was displeased, his eyes seemed to darken and his brows lowered to give him a harsher expression. When George was uneasy, as he was at that moment, his eyes widened, making him look younger and more open.

‘I will have a contract drawn up,’ Fitzwilliam said at last. ‘Stating that you have declined my father’s offer of the living at Kympton and that you choose instead to receive the cost of your studies in the profession of law. It shall be a one-off sum. There will be no further payments made. No tradesman’s bills, no tailor’s bills, no gambling debts. No other financial aid will follow. If you accept the money and sign the contract, you will be agreeing that I have discharged my father’s wishes towards you, and there is nothing further owing.’

George took a step back. ‘Egad, Fitz,’ he said with a slight laugh. ‘Contracts, agreements—it all sounds rather formal. I thought we were friends. You’re the closest I have to a brother.’ He smiled beseechingly. ‘Remember what larks we had as children? Remember that time we found that basket of wishes?’

‘I remember you *stealing* a basket of wishes. As to magic and wishes, I don’t hold with any of that nonsense now. My father was right: magic is for children and the uneducated.’

‘I see,’ said George. ‘You *have* changed.’

‘Of course I’ve changed. I’ve grown up, and I am taking *my* adult responsibilities seriously.’

‘It sounds like I’m being paid off, sent packing, cast out.’

‘I’m not casting you out, George. But I am disappointed. I can’t deny it. I want everything squared up and put in writing. I want your acknowledgement that I have done all I can to fulfil my father’s wishes.’

George stepped forward again. ‘Very well. I’m in no position to argue with the great man.’ He spoke with an edge of mockery. ‘As soon as my father looks to be on the mend, I’ll return to London and begin my law studies.’

Fitzwilliam nodded curtly.

‘May I see Georgiana?’ George asked in parting. ‘I promised her I’d be sure to see her as soon as I was home.’

Fitzwilliam hesitated; the niggling doubt over the paternity of the baby down at the shepherd’s cottage troubled him. ‘Of course,’ he said finally. ‘Georgiana loves you like a brother, George. I hope you will never do anything to betray her trust in you.’ He looked at him seriously.

‘Have a heart, Fitz,’ said George, his old humour returning to his voice.

‘Close the door on your way out,’ answered Fitzwilliam. ‘I’ve a mountain of paperwork to get through this morning.’

MR. WICKHAM, steward of Pemberley, died six days later. Fitzwilliam attended his funeral and assured his widow that she would always have an annuity and accommodation provided for her on the Pemberley estate until her son was established in his law career and was able to provide a home for her. She wept and railed about George being cheated by being raised a gentleman and then dropped into penury and forced to grub for a living. Fitzwilliam chose to ignore her complaints, agreeing with the housekeeper, who ushered her away, that she was likely overcome with grief and knew not what she was saying.

A NEW STEWARD was established at Pemberley. Mrs. Wickham had retired to a cottage in the village, where she complained that there was not room enough for her chests of clothes. Her son disappeared back to London.

Life resumed its cycle of springtime and harvest, annual hunts, and occasional pleasure parties. All agreed that the young master was every bit as good as the old one, for he looked after things remarkably well, and if he were a bit proud-speaking for such a young man and were taking his time in finding a mistress for Pemberley, well, that was the way with young men of fortune. They had a right to be proud and to marry when they willed to, and not before. And as for the baby boy the head shepherd’s wife was bringing up upon her knees, well, it were too clever and well-behaved to be a changeling, that was certain. And the sturdy little lad had such lovely

chestnut-coloured brown waves, with hazel-brown eyes as wide and clear as an angel's.

MOTHER & DAUGHTER

When Fitzwilliam was satisfied that the running of the estates was well supervised and operating to his satisfaction, he permitted himself to indulge in the pleasures of travel. He loved nothing more than a long galloping ride, passing through new towns and countryside. He had innumerable invitations to stay at manors and castles and city villas to give him good reason for his sojourns. He was aware that most of the homes he was invited to visit contained young ladies of marriageable age, and the invitations came from the hopeful mamas of such young ladies. Fitzwilliam Darcy could not fail to be aware that he was considered a highly eligible young man.

His cousin John teased him on the subject as they journeyed together to make their annual visit to their Aunt Catherine. Since the death of Lord de Bourgh, they felt more duty-bound to keep up the visits to their widowed aunt and fatherless cousin.

‘So when are you going to settle down, Darcy? Twenty-seven years of age and not even a whisper of an attachment. You’ll end up an old bachelor at this rate.’

‘You are twenty-nine,’ Darcy reminded him. ‘So what entitles you to warn me against a permanent bachelorhood?’

‘Ah, but there is one crucial difference between us,’ said John. ‘I am the younger son of only a moderately wealthy man, while you were the only son and heir to a very rich one. All those poor young ladies flitting their fans and eyelashes at you in vain—I’ve seen them. You travel up and down

the kingdom leaving a trail of broken hearts and hopes in your wake. You're a veritable whirlwind of romantic destruction, Darcy.'

'I don't see that bachelorhood is so bad a thing,' said Darcy, ignoring the foolish comments regarding romance and broken hearts. 'There's much to be said for coming and going as you please. It would take a remarkable young lady to make me want to give up such freedom, and I've not met any such person as yet.'

'You're too fastidious by far, that's your trouble,' said his cousin. 'You want a woman with the beauty of an angel, the sweetness of a madonna, the manners of a duchess, and a handsome dowry to boot.'

'Nonsense. A sensible young lady with excellent manners and education who can set an example to Georgiana is all I look for. If I were looking.'

'Nothing regarding looks?' cried his cousin. 'I don't believe for a moment you would settle for a woman who was not a beauty!'

'A good degree of attraction is important,' granted Darcy. 'I imagine a man likes to look across the breakfast table at a handsome face. But good family, good connections, good manners, and like-minded interests—those are the things that make for a successful marriage. The woman who is fit to be mistress of Pemberley and sister to Georgiana must be of impeccable character. I don't need a rich wife; I need a wife of good family who understands the responsibility of running a large house with many dependants.'

'Upon my sword and spurs, Darcy, to listen to you reel off all the qualities you require in a wife is as though I were listening to an advertisement for a new housekeeper—for there's not one word about love!'

'But what do you call love? My parents loved each other, I am sure, but it was a quiet affection. A mutual respect and regard. I'm not sure I believe in the kind of love you refer to. The kind of madness that is called romantic love where one loses one head over another person. I place that kind of love in the same category as faeries and magic. Insubstantial, irrational, and not necessary to a successful life.'

John laughed and said, 'All that tells me, Darcy, is that you have never yet been in love.'

'I know of a young man, Charles Bingley, who is always falling in love,' said Darcy. 'He's the best-natured fellow you could ever meet, and I'm prodigiously fond of him, but to see him careering about in raptures

over his latest “angel” is quite absurd. I’ve had to extricate him from some highly unsuitable attachments on more than one occasion. If there’s one thing I will not submit to, it is being absurd. When I make my choice of a wife, I shall do so with a clear, rational head.’

John laughed heartily, though Darcy did not understand what was so funny.

‘I suppose I’d best cease all talk of marriage now,’ said John, when his merriment had subsided. The gates of Rosings Park, the home of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, were now coming into view. ‘For you’ll have hints enough from Aunt Catherine regarding that point. Can she really expect you to marry poor Anne? She’s not fit for walking the length of the shrubbery, let alone having the strength for marriage and bearing an heir.’

Darcy did not reply. It was a sore point with him. He had decided from the moment he had first laid eyes on his cousin that she was not going to be a future bride for him. A memory flashed into his mind of him as a five-year-old, being urged to kiss baby Anne. He recalled an old woman’s face, a strange face, with something otherworldly about it. She had pressed a silvery wish into his hand. She had said something to him while putting a hand upon his head. What had she said? It was something about love. He couldn’t recall. Perhaps Plumtree would know; she’d been there. He certainly wouldn’t ask Aunt Catherine about it.

They reached the entrance to Rosings, and Darcy’s valet jumped down from his mount to open the gates. Darcy and John both steeled themselves for another dreary week at Aunt Catherine’s.

LADY CATHERINE WAS to be found in all her great state in the tapestry chamber. To a stranger, her unsmiling countenance and lofty tone of voice might indicate that she was not pleased to greet her nephews, but Darcy and John knew better. They indulged her queenly gravity by bowing very low and kissing her proffered hand. They took care to keep out of the way of Oberon, Lady Catherine’s large, longhaired cat. Oberon sat on a kingly cushion beside his mistress and hissed a warning at anyone approaching him or his consort too closely.

Less formal bows and a mere touch of the hand were all that were required by Cousin Anne, who squinted at them with her short-sighted eyes

and clasped her thin hands together in pleasure at having new faces to look at.

His aunt's interrogation of Darcy began first.

'How is my niece? When will she come to visit? I know she must be longing to visit. She must come in the summer.'

'Georgiana is very well, ma'am. She has arrangements made for the summer, but she will certainly wait upon you as early in the autumn as she can.'

'Arrangements? What arrangements can a girl of fifteen have?'

'She has long desired to visit the coast. I have secured her a house on the east coast for the summer. I hope to join her there for a week or two.'

'Who is going with her? She must have at least two menservants with her, two at the very least. A young lady must never travel without at least two attendants.'

'She will have her old governess with her, and they will be accompanied by two of my men.'

'I cannot reconcile myself to the idea of young ladies travelling abroad without proper chaperones as they seem to do these days. In my day, a young lady never travelled without a male relative to accompany her. Never. And how are her studies? Did you send for the music master I recommended? He teaches the daughters of the Countess of Darlington, and she thinks very highly of him. I hope you have secured him?'

'I have made enquiries, Aunt,' was all Darcy would reply. 'How does my cousin Anne get on with her music?' he asked, desiring to turn the conversation.

He turned to Anne. She opened her mouth as though to answer, but her mother immediately replied, 'Anne would do very well with her music if she had the health for it. Sadly, she is too weak in body and mind for the rigours of daily practise, and she has all but given it up. She has not the strength in her chest to play the flute or in her fingers for the piano or harp. She has not touched an instrument in more than a year.'

Anne's lady attendant nodded in agreement and gave a sympathetic smile to her charge. Anne's pale cheeks flushed ever so slightly.

'And do you get out much?' Darcy asked his cousin. 'I hope you are able to partake in some activities beyond the house?' He felt sorry for Anne, immured in Rosings.

Anne opened her mouth to speak again, but her mother said, 'Anne goes out for a little ride in the chair every day, when the weather permits. She did call upon Lady Metcalfe and her daughter last week, but she was most exhausted by the exertion. She has not been out since. But we have a new parson coming next month,' she added. 'A young man who was recommended to me by Lady Poleacre. She knew him to be a good sort of a man, and in need of a living. His reputation is quite unblemished, so I offered him the living here. He will make a new addition to our little circle. He will make a fourth at cards, should we need one in the evenings, as we often do. I only hope he is a good player. The previous parson—Mr. Bootes, if you recall—was a dreadful player, and his wife was not at all elegant. The new parson is unmarried, and you may be sure I shall recommend him to marry quickly and to make certain he chooses a genteel young lady who can play at cribbage. But where are the refreshments? I sent for them as soon as you arrived. Go and see about them, Jenkinson,' she ordered Anne's attendant.

'Now, then,' she said, turning back to her nephews. 'John, tell me how Henrietta is getting on. I suppose she is very close to her confinement now? I hope she took my recommendations and has done all I advised?'

John now took his turn in being interrogated.

Darcy moved to sit nearer to Anne.

'I would do very well at the piano if Mama did not forbid me to practise,' she whispered indignantly to him. 'And I should like very much to try at riding, but I am not allowed.'

'You must assert yourself, Anne,' he said quietly. 'I've told you this many a time. You are not a child. Don't let your mother treat you like one.'

'I try,' said Anne. 'But she wears me down so. It is easier to give in to her.'

'Nothing will change until you make it change.'

'I wish I had a faery godmother, like Lady Alice Montgomery-Walsh has,' said Anne plaintively. 'I heard from Eleanor Metcalfe that Lady Alice has only to make a wish, and things are arranged just as she likes, though she can only wish for small things. Even having my way in small things would be wonderful.'

'Wishing for things is easy,' said Darcy. 'Working for things by your own will and wits is what makes character. You must exert yourself. You can make things change.'

‘I should if I had strength,’ said Anne resignedly. ‘We are not all as fortunate as you in that respect. Some of us could do with some otherworldly help.’

‘What are you two talking about?’ came Lady Catherine’s strident voice. ‘I must have my share in the conversation. Be careful not to rattle on, Anne; you will tire yourself out, and then you will be unfit for company this evening.’

Anne’s waiting lady returned from ordering the refreshments, and Darcy was obliged to give up his seat to her.

INTRIGUES

Darcy and John had fulfilled their week. Their aunt exerted all her powers of persuasion to delay them some days longer: it was too damp for their ride; the roads were too muddy, and they had better wait until the ground had dried. They ought to stay a little longer that they might accompany her to Lady Metcalfe's party next week. They must long to stay on; she knew they must find it excessively difficult to leave, and Fitzwilliam especially must find it unbearable to tear himself away from her and from Anne. She knew it was so. But Darcy was the only person in her life who was resistant to her sway, and so she had to endure her nephews' leave-taking immediately after breakfast on the appointed day.

'Poor Aunt Catherine,' said John as they trotted out of the gates of Rosings Park. 'She wants so much to have company, but then she drives it away again! Audley and Henrietta have only seen her twice in the past three years, and Henrietta says one of the best things about having confinements and small children is that she will have excuse enough to be unable to travel for several years at least.'

'It's Anne you should reserve your sympathy for,' said Darcy. 'I wish she would exert herself against her mother's tyranny.'

'You feel no obligation to carry her off and rescue her, then?' John teased.

Darcy did not consider such a question deserving of an answer.

'Do you ride back to Pemberley?' asked John.

'I do. I've business with my steward, which will keep me busy a fortnight or so. Then I go to London for business with my lawyer.'

‘So much business, so little pleasure, Darcy. I wish Audley were more like you. He’s rarely to be found when there are matters of business to attend to; I generally end up seeing to it on his behalf. All the responsibilities of an elder son but none of the benefits,’ he said wryly.

‘That is precisely why my father appointed you and not Audley as guardian to Georgiana,’ said Fitzwilliam. ‘*You* can be trusted with honouring your responsibilities. As to pleasure, I am riding down to the east coast to meet Georgiana when my business in town is concluded. That will be my week’s pleasure when the work is done.’

‘How’s the old steward’s son settling in at Kympton?’ asked John.

‘He’s not,’ said Darcy. ‘He decided he would go into the law instead.’

John could not have failed to notice the grim tone of his cousin’s voice. ‘Does that displease you, it being your father’s wish for him to have the living?’

‘It does not displease me that he has determined not to go into orders. Indeed, I consider him wholly unfit for such a profession. But other aspects of his behaviour have displeased me; in particular it angered me to receive a letter from him last year, announcing that his studies in the law had not gone as well as he hoped, and could he, after all, have the living at Kympton. The reality is that he had not studied law at all, but had spent the money given him in idleness and profligate living. It disgusts me to think of my father’s money being squandered in such manner. I wrote back reminding him that I had discharged all obligations towards him on his acceptance of the money advanced to him three years earlier. I can only imagine his resentment towards such a reply. I see or hear nothing of him now. His mother died two years ago. Now that she is gone, there is nothing to tie him to Pemberley or the vicinity.’

‘He must have behaved very badly,’ said John, ‘if you’ve broken all connection with him, for I remember what close companions you were in your youth.’

‘George Wickham is not a man to be trusted, I am sorry to say,’ said Darcy. ‘Perhaps in time we’ll renew our friendship; I know my father would be sorry to see us divided. But he will have to earn back my good opinion first.’

DARCY COMPLETED his business with his steward and lawyer sooner than anticipated and determined to set off for the coast and surprise Georgiana by arriving a week early.

It was pleasant to ride along the coastal path into the seaside town of Ramsgate. It had been a good decision to come. He found the rented house quickly; its exalted position on the top of a gentle hill overlooking the harbour made it easy to find. One of his men from Pemberley met him on his approach and took his horse from him. Darcy rapped at the house door.

‘Oh, heavens above!’ cried Mrs. Younge, Georgiana’s companion and former governess, when she opened the door to him.

Darcy wondered that she should look so alarmed at the sight of him.

‘Afternoon, Mrs. Younge,’ he said, striding into the house and looking into the doorway of the parlour for his sister. He stepped back into the entrance hall and held out his hat to the manservant who had hurried in at the sound of his master’s voice. ‘Where is Miss Darcy?’ he asked as the attendant removed his riding cloak. ‘Is she resting?’

‘Oh . . . she is . . . that is . . .’ stammered Mrs. Younge. ‘Yes, sir. Resting.’

Darcy frowned, wondering why Mrs. Younge looked so unsettled.

‘Is that him?’ cried a young voice, and Darcy looked towards a staircase from which the voice had sounded. There came the patter of quick footsteps, and Georgiana appeared.

‘Oh!’ she cried out, looking confused. ‘Fitzwilliam! I did not expect you!’

‘I hope being unexpected is reckoned a pleasant thing?’ said Darcy, moving to meet her and noticing the sudden blush that spread across her cheek as he bent to kiss it in greeting.

‘Oh, of course not! That is to say—of course, it is a pleasant thing!’ The white of her gown heightened the red upon her cheeks. ‘It is *such* a surprise; that is all!’

Darcy caught the swift look that passed between Georgiana and Mrs. Younge. It was momentary, but it did not escape him.

‘I’ll just step out to the . . . er . . . fish market at the harbour,’ murmured Mrs. Younge with a shallow curtsy. ‘We’ll be needing extra for dinner now that Mr. Darcy is come.’

‘Oh, yes . . . do,’ said Georgiana, and her strange flush deepened.

Darcy waited until Mrs. Younge had bustled out, noting that she took no basket on her arm for carrying home fish.

‘Should you like some refreshment? You must be in need of some after your long ride,’ said Georgiana, walking into the parlour and looking about her with a distracted air, as though she expected to see refreshments appear.

‘What I should most like,’ said Darcy, waiting until she turned her agitated eyes back to him, ‘is for you to tell me what the matter is, Georgiana. Whom were you expecting when I arrived, and who is it that Mrs. Younge has hurried off to warn?’

Georgiana stared at him. A succession of emotions passed across her young face: dismay, fear, and then a moment of relief as her lip trembled and her large, brown eyes welled up with tears. ‘Oh Fitzwilliam,’ she said shakily, ‘I think you will be ever so angry . . . I don’t know how to tell you . . . I fear I may have done something very foolish and you will be furious with me!’

With his thumb, Darcy wiped a tear away as it rolled down his sister’s cheek. ‘Come now,’ he said gently. ‘Have I ever been angry with you?’

She shook her head, her dark ringlets swinging about her face. ‘But,’ she said in almost a whisper, ‘I think it is very bad. I did not see that it was bad until now. They said it was a good thing; they said I would be so happy. They said you were so busy with your estate and your friends that you would not miss me, and they would take such good care of me. But now you are here, it seems like it was a kind of dream. It does not seem like such a good thing after all, for I think you might miss me after all, and I know I would miss you.’

Darcy stared at her, trying to unravel the meaning in her words. He composed himself to speak very kindly, as though speaking to a foal that would bolt at a quick movement or loud word. ‘Georgiana, dear, you are the most important person in my life. Now who is it that has been speaking to you, and what have they been saying?’

Georgiana sank onto a chair and burst into tears. Darcy waited patiently until she could speak between sobs. ‘I was so lonely, Fitzwilliam, and he was so kind to me. He took me out and visited me every day when I was in London.’

‘Who, Georgiana? Who visited you?’

‘George Wickham. I wanted to tell you when I wrote to you, but he said I ought not to mention his name to you, for you would be angry and would

forbid me to see him again. I'm sorry, Fitzwilliam, but he was such a kind friend to me, just as he used to be.'

'And is that the only thing that you were asked to keep a secret from me?' said Darcy. 'That you were being visited by George?'

She pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at her nose. 'No,' she said in a small voice. 'George said he would marry me and would be my friend and protector all the days of our lives. They said I would be so happy with him, and he has been so kind and attentive that I agreed to it, for it felt so nice to be taken care of.'

The room began to swim round a little for Darcy, and he sat down quickly, feeling as though he had been dealt a violent blow. His breath quickened as he fought down a hot surge of anger. It took all of his self-control to keep his voice calm as he asked, 'When you say, "they," I presume you mean George and Mrs. Younge?'

Georgiana nodded.

'And when did they intend for you to marry?'

Georgiana looked at him with frightened eyes. 'Oh, Fitzwilliam, you won't do anything bad, will you? You won't fight a duel with him, will you? He said you would if I told you—please promise me you won't fight him!'

Darcy did not want to make any such promise. If what he suspected of George was true, then a duel was exactly what he hungered for.

'I couldn't bear it if you were hurt—or killed—I would wish to die myself!' cried Georgiana, leaning forward to take hold of her brother's hands and weep over them.

Somehow, through the red cloud of vengeful desire, he heard his sister's plea and the terror in her voice.

'Tell me one thing,' said Darcy, frightened of the answer, for he did not know what he would do if she answered him as he feared. 'Did he . . . has he . . . ever touched you?'

She lifted her head to look at him, and his heart hammered in his chest. 'He . . . ' she faltered. 'He held my hand.'

Darcy felt a rush of relief. 'And that is all?'

She nodded and dropped her head again.

He exhaled and slumped back against the chair, pulling his hands from hers. His worst fear was allayed. 'Then I promise,' he said in a choked

voice. 'No duels. But you must tell me the truth, Georgiana. There must be no more secrets between us.'

'I will tell you everything, Fitzwilliam.'

MOST HEARTILY SORRY

Darcy stood at the window while Georgiana related her tale. He kept his back to her so she would not see the look on his face. He knew it would frighten her to see him looking so savage. He felt sick at the thought of what would have happened had he not journeyed down earlier than planned. If he had arrived just two days later, then George Wickham, who had been secretly cultivating the confidence of fifteen-year-old Georgiana during the past months, would have carried her away for an elopement, thus securing to himself Georgiana's extensive dowry and most certainly securing for her an unhappy future. He gritted his teeth that he might not express the words that filled his mouth at that time. Scoundrel, blaggard, deceiving wretch of vicious propensities—these were the mildest of the terms that he bit back.

When Georgiana had finished her sorry account, he turned back to her and took her hand while she finished sobbing out her misery.

'Don't grieve so,' he said. 'I don't hold you responsible, Georgiana. You are too young to be accountable. All the guilt lies with him. Go upstairs and rest and calm yourself. Go on. We will talk later.'

Georgiana obediently left the room.

Darcy returned to the window, watching for the return of Mrs. Younge. She came hurrying up the slope of the hill to the house, looking anxious and harried. He waited until he heard the click of the latch on the front door as she closed it behind her. There was a silent pause, as though she were standing in the hall unsure of where to go next.

When her footsteps moved nearer, he called out in a low but clear voice. 'A word, Mrs. Younge.'

She stood in the doorway, not meeting his eyes. Her hands moved to the clasp at her cloak.

'No need to remove your cloak,' said Darcy. 'You will gather your possessions and leave this house immediately. You will not speak one word in parting to Georgiana, either now or at any time in the future. Your employment is terminated, and if you ever speak Miss Darcy's name to another living soul in relation to *that* man, whom you permitted to have unlawful contact with her, I will not rest until I see you standing before the magistrates and convicted for calumny and perfidy. Do you understand?'

Mrs. Younge murmured a frightened, 'Yes, sir.'

'Tell me one thing before you go.'

She stood still, staring down at the floor.

'Why did you do it?'

She made the smallest of shrugs.

'Did he promise you something? Did he bribe you?'

She said nothing.

'He would not have kept his word,' said Darcy. 'If he promised you a share of my sister's fortune, you can be sure you would never have seen a penny of it.'

She flashed him a resentful look, then turned and hurried away.

GEORGIANA WAS FILLED with remorse at what she had been on the brink of falling into, and it took all Darcy's efforts to reassure and comfort her over the course of the ensuing days.

They took long walks near the seashore together and rode out, exploring the countryside. As the fortnight drew to a close, she was a good deal recovered in spirits. In quiet moments, the enormity of what had almost happened came afresh to Darcy, and he felt sick at the thought that he could have lost his beloved sister to that scheming fortune hunter. At times he felt like calling for his horse and riding full gallop back to London to hunt George down and vent his fury on him.

But for his sister's sake, he would do nothing to bring public attention to the matter. If the affair were known, Georgiana's name and reputation would be tarnished. She would become the gossip of every dining room and

parlour in the kingdom. He could not bear the thought of it. It would crush her sensitive and shy nature to be the object of such vile attention. No one must ever know of it. The only person he would ever speak of it to would be John, for as legal guardian of Georgiana, he had a right to know. He would speak to his cousin, and they would decide between them how best to protect Georgiana from ever becoming the victim of any fortune hunter again.

GEORGIANA WAS SAFELY RETURNED to Pemberley. No worthless young man would find opportunity to approach her while she was under the watchful eyes of Mrs. Reynolds and Plumtree.

Darcy delighted his Aunt Catherine in writing to her to seek her advice as to employing a new companion for Georgiana, though he gave only a vague reason for requiring such a person. Lady Catherine wrote back immediately to say that she knew the perfect person, and Mrs. Violetta Annesley would be arriving at Pemberley within a fortnight, bearing a most excellent character reference. She was the second cousin of Lady Poleacre, but was a poor relation, made more poor due to her husband's unexpected demise and the fact of her husband's estate being entailed away from his widow, for they had been childless. In Lady Catherine's decided opinion, this entailing of estates away from the female line was a shameful notion, but neither the poverty of Mrs. Annesley nor her ridiculous Christian name—for she did so dislike such foolish, flowery names—ought to be held against her. She was well educated, had excellent manners, and was only six and twenty, and therefore not too old to be a pleasant companion for Georgiana, but not so young as to be flighty.

Darcy was a little vexed to read that the lady would be thrust upon him without his soliciting an interview, but he told himself he should have known that in asking Lady Catherine's advice, he would have the entire matter taken out of his hands by her. However, in this case his aunt proved correct in her assertions. Mrs. Violetta Annesley, a plain but pleasant young lady, suited Georgiana very well, for her manners were as kindly and genteel as her own.

DARCY SPENT a good deal of time with his sister in the months that followed, anxious that she should not be lonely as she had been during his former long absences. Unbeknownst to him, his housekeeper and senior valet discussed this new pattern of his remaining at home and wondered over it.

‘I do hope he’s not going to turn into one of them reclusive bachelor types,’ Mrs. Reynolds frequently worried over her nightly glass of spiced wine. ‘How is he ever to marry if he never goes anywhere to meet young ladies anymore?’

‘I thought you’d rather not see a new mistress coming in and changing things all about,’ said Hodson.

‘I take no pleasure in things being all changed about,’ agreed Mrs. Reynolds, ‘but I should like to see a young family growing up here. A house is not a home without the sound of children’s voices in the halls, in my opinion.’ She looked very subdued suddenly and gave a sigh.

‘I’m surprised you never married again and had a family, Mistress. Reynolds,’ said Hodson, accurately guessing the cause of the housekeeper’s melancholy sigh.

‘I never met another man who wanted to marry me, is the truth of it,’ said the housekeeper. ‘I’ve been in service since I were eighteen years old, after Mr Reynolds died, bless his soul. I’ve worked hard to get to my position. I’ve had no time for suitors or any thoughts of marriage.’

‘You’re young enough yet,’ said Hodson gallantly. ‘If I were ten years younger, I’d think you were a fine catch.’

Mrs. Reynolds laughed and blushed at the same time. ‘You’re as much of a charmer as that young Wickham always was. He used to catch me by the hands, turn me round, and ask me to marry him, the little rascal, for he were only doing so to wheedle something out of me.’

‘Does seem peculiar that we’ve barely seen him here since the master died,’ said Hodson. ‘The master thought of him as a son, and this was as good as his home.’

‘Even Miss Darcy never speaks a word of him,’ added Mrs. Reynolds. ‘If his name is mentioned in the presence of the master or Miss Darcy, they both clam up tight. The master looks as displeased as though someone had said a bad word about the family name rather than said the name of Wickham, while Miss Darcy looks as though the devil himself had been

named, and not the man who was as good as a brother to her all these past years.'

'I reckon it's to do with the child,' said Hodson, refilling his cup from the bottle at his hand. Mrs. Reynolds put her hand over her glass to keep him from refilling it. She was very particular with regards to only drinking one glass before bedtime. 'There's little doubt that the boy is young Wickham's child,' continued Hodson. 'One look at those big eyes of his and his brown wavy hair, and you can see the image of both the late Mr. Wickham and the young one—the very image of them. The master is mighty proud of his family name, and to have young Wickham bring gossip and scandal upon it through that child is no doubt more than he can bear.'

Mrs. Reynolds nodded her linen-capped head in agreement. 'He were always quick to take offence at any wrongdoing, even as a boy,' she said. 'He were always a good and kindly spoken boy, but he always was proud of his family reputation, and the master and mistress did drum that into him from the time he could talk.'

'Perhaps that's why he has no liking for getting wed,' said Hodson. 'Most likely he's not met a young lady whose family name is as good as his own.'

'That may be so,' agreed Mrs. Reynolds. 'He's always been most particular in all things. It would take a remarkable young lady to catch his eye. Mayhap you're right, Hodson. Mayhap such a young lady, who has beauty and all the accomplishments that the master would think fitting, as well as being of good family, is yet to be met with. The lady who is good enough to be mistress of Pemberley would be hard to find, for she must be a rare one, to be sure.'

Hodson lifted up his glass. 'A toast to the future mistress of Pemberley: may she not delay in being met with!'

A VERY CHARMING NEIGHBOUR

A year passed by, and Fitzwilliam could see that his sister was comfortable and secure in the care of Mrs. Annesley. The trauma of the previous year's event with Wickham began to ease. He saw his sister and her companion settled in London where Georgiana could continue in her studies, and he then permitted himself to resume visiting his friends abroad. Charles Bingley had been writing to him weekly, pressing him to join him at his house in London, and thus to Bingley's house Darcy went.

'MR. DARCY!' cried a well-modulated young lady's voice. 'How absolutely delightful! Why, I was just saying to Louisa that it would not surprise me one whit if you were to arrive a day earlier than expected. I never knew a man so punctual in my life—not at all like Charles. He is always late.'

'Then we are neither of us punctual,' said Darcy, removing his hat and bowing politely to the two ladies who met him upon his entrance to Charles Bingley's house.

'Darcy!' cried a second voice, this one belonging to that of a young man. 'Jolly glad you could come! I'm in a dilemma, and in need of a good brain to help me see my way.'

'Another dilemma,' said Darcy. 'Is it romantic or material this time?'

'Neither,' said the first lady. 'This time it is residential.'

'I can't decide where to spend the winter,' said Charles Bingley. 'Caroline thinks we should go north, up your end of the kingdom, but I'm

for going south. I've barely seen anything of the south.'

'What is there to see?' asked Caroline Bingley. 'Fields of sheep inland and nothing but mudflats and fishwives along the coast. The south is a positive wilderness, Charles. We had much better go north. It would be an excellent opportunity to look around for a good estate. Do you not agree, Louisa?'

Louisa nodded her feathery-capped head and said that they had much better go north; there was no fashion to be seen south of the kingdom.

'Perhaps,' said Darcy, 'the midlands by way of compromise?'

'Excellent idea,' cried Caroline. 'Did I not say that Mr. Darcy would have the answer?'

'What counties are there in the midlands?' asked Louisa, pushing a feather out of her eyes.

'Why, there are the coastal towns to the east of the city,' said Charles Bingley.

'Oh, no, Charles,' said his elder sister, Louisa. 'The sea winds are quite dreadful in the winter months.'

'Well then, there's the western county of Gloucester,' said Charles. 'An excellent hunting county, I believe.'

'But not an excellent county for good company,' argued his younger sister, Caroline. 'They are so positively countrified that far west. What do you recommend, Mr. Darcy?'

'There are good estates to be had in every county,' said Darcy. 'But if you want the best of hunting and society, why not go only as far as the nearest counties, to Buckinghamshire or Hertfordshire?'

'Hertfordshire!' cried Charles Bingley. 'Why, I do believe some fellow mentioned to me only the other day that he knew of a manor in Hertfordshire that he was looking for tenants for. Now who was it I was speaking to?'

'It was Sir Woodcock's man,' said a drawling voice from the other side of the room.

'So it was!' said Charles, snapping his fingers at his drawling brother-in-law, who had been napping on the sofa. 'A good-sized manor with well-stocked park, that was what he said. I shall speak to him about it today!'

DARCY AGREED to ride into Hertfordshire with Charles Bingley and look over the manor house he was considering leasing. Mr. Morris, who managed the house, met them and showed them over the property. Neither young man was much interested in the number of parlours and the dimensions of the galleries. To Louisa and Caroline's later dismay, the men had no recollection of whether the curtains in the dining hall were of velvet or silk, or how large the dressing chambers in the bedrooms were. All that their brother could tell them was that the house was in good order, with a good aspect. There was room enough for as large a party as Bingley might wish to gather about him, for he was of a sociable nature, but most importantly, the park was well-stocked with game, and the stables were large and sound.

Mr. Bingley declared he was much delighted with the house, shook hands with Mr. Morris, signed papers, and announced he would be resident in Netherfield Park by the month's end. He would send a party of servants down next week to begin the preparations.

MISS CAROLINE BINGLEY acknowledged Netherfield to be a very sweet house with its twenty-two rooms. Nothing by way of comparison to Pemberley, of course, but quite charming. She would be most happy to set up house for her brother here; he was not to concern himself about anything domestic, for she would oversee all. She would not hear of hiring any local servants or cooks, for she could not be sure that they were up to the high standards of service that were required. Thus she offended a good deal of the villagers and the local town of Meryton by turning away every request for employment and insisting that their servants be hired from London.

She would have likewise insisted on having all the provisions delivered from London, but Charles, after meeting the locals on his walks about Meryton, informed her that he had already spoken to the local butcher and dairyman and suppliers. He thought they were remarkably friendly people, and he had assured them all of his custom.

'Charles, you don't know what you are about,' said Caroline in vexation. 'Leave all the housekeeping to me! We do not know what

standards these people have; we had far better get our meat and cheese from town.'

'I won't hear of it,' insisted Charles. 'I mean to make myself agreeable to my neighbours, for I've met with nothing but civility from everyone I've spoken to.'

'Well, of course you have,' said his sister Louisa, taking Caroline's part. 'They all see you as very profitable to their businesses.'

'And why should I not make use of the local businesses?' argued Charles. 'I think it very rude not to use them. I think it amounts to a snub. I will not snub my neighbours; I am determined to make good relations with all. I've had a good many visitors, and I've received two invitations to dine already. And tomorrow we shall meet all our new neighbours at the public ball in the town—I'm sure there cannot be a more excellent way to meet the local society than at a dance!'

Caroline and Louisa shook their well-coiffed heads at their brother's simple ways, but Mr. Darcy could not be prevailed upon to join them in their arguments against the locals. He was of the mind that Bingley should order his own house just as he pleased.

'I daresay, Mr. Darcy, you do not take an interest in who supplies *your* eggs when you are at home,' said Caroline.

'I am very desirous of supporting the industry in the local villages and towns about Pemberley,' said Darcy.

'But I daresay you leave all such things to your housekeeper, seeing as you have no wife to oversee such matters.'

'I have known my housekeeper since I was four years old. She knows my wishes well enough to act in accordance with them without my interference.'

'But I daresay it must be very trying to run such a large estate without the assistance of a wife,' continued Caroline. 'Even if you do have a good housekeeper. When you marry, Mr. Darcy, you must make sure you choose a wife who is perfectly capable of managing an establishment.'

Fitzwilliam bowed very politely but did not return her smile. He was so used to hints regarding his choice of a wife whenever he was in female company that he'd learnt not to acknowledge them beyond a bow. He certainly would not get drawn into another discussion of marriage with Caroline Bingley.

DISAPPOINTMENT & SPLEEN

When Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy had reached the inquisitive and tender age of five years in his grandiose home in the north of the kingdom, another family was dwelling some distance southward, with whom the young Mr. Darcy would, in another twenty years or so, be most unexpectedly entwined.

This unknown family desired a son and heir as ardently and anxiously as the Darcys had done five years previous.

In the Bennet family, in their modest manor with their home farm, small dairy, and respectably stocked poultry house, the need was so pressing that Mrs. Bennet had no scruples in seeking whatever aid she could purchase in this endeavour. She had not one drop of noble blood in her that would qualify her to call upon a faery godmother for help in acquiring her hoped-for son, but she would certainly purchase whatever assistance she could from any wisewoman or any other connection to the fairfolk she could find.

Mrs. Bennet had been a Miss Jane Gardiner, called Janet by her family and intimate friends. She was considered a handsome young woman and was of a respectable merchant's family. All the young men, and many of the older men, in her hometown had admired her dark curls, her fresh, youthful complexion and figure. Her heart had been set on marrying a handsome officer of the duke's regiment, for she was much taken with their chivalrous manners and their splendid cloaks and spurs. But despite there being a good company of soldiers at Morton Castle, who were gracious enough to come to the town feasts and dances, she failed to secure an officer of her own.

She smiled and laughed a good deal, which gave the impression that she would make a good-natured wife, and thus she had offers of marriage from the cooper's brother, the tailor's eldest son, and the young, widowed brewer in the next town. She gave no consideration at all to the cooper's brother, for the business would not pass to him. She *did* consider the offer of the tailor's son, for he would be heir to a profitable business, especially now that the tailor supplied the liveries of all the grand houses within twenty-five miles. But the living accommodation above the tailor's shop was so poky, with no room for entertaining or dancing, that she felt it would be unbearable to live there. She had grown up with an older brother and sister in a pleasant town house with a parlour big enough for six couples to enjoy a country reel in. To be demoted to the tailor's cramped rooms would be grievous indeed.

That left the brewer, who was certainly a handsome man with a profitable business, but he did drink rather a lot of his own stock. There were whispers that he was not such a handsome man when he'd had a few too many tankards of ale. Her elder brother talked her out of accepting him on these grounds but might not have been so successful if Miss Gardiner had not also happened to greatly dislike the smell of hops.

Just when she was beginning to think that the tailor's son might have to do after all, there came a providential encounter with a young man who had lately returned to a nearby village to take up his inherited estate at Longbourn. Young Mr. Bennet was a gentleman farmer with two parlours, one of which would hold ten couples for a country reel.

Janet Gardiner could hardly believe her luck when Mr. Bennet asked her to dance at a public ball in the town, not once, but twice, and then called upon her at home the next day. She smiled sweetly and fluttered her lashes but said little, for her garrulous mother did all the talking. But it was soon apparent that Mr. Bennet was entranced by Miss Gardiner's dark curls and girlish laugh, and he promptly made her an offer of marriage, for, as he explained, he had made up his mind that his inheritance at Longbourn would not be complete without a lady to join him. Thus the new Mrs. Bennet settled into her parlours very happily and insisted on calling them drawing rooms. She exclaimed her good luck to all her neighbours and held dinners and dancing parties and ordered many new gowns.

Mr. Bennet was a little disappointed, if truth be told, to discover after a short passage of time that his pretty new wife had no conversation beyond

ribbons, baubles, and local gossip, and had no head for the practicalities of supervising a dairy or poultry house. He had rather hoped that marrying a girl from a practical, respectable trade family would have ensured him a helpmeet in running his little estate, but there he was wrong. Miss Gardiner, who had helped her mother in the kitchen at home and had made all her own gowns and her brother's shirts, considered herself far above such humble offices now that she was Mrs. Bennet with two drawing rooms. She now spent her days visiting and being visited by all the other ladies of the locality who had leisure and new gowns enough for a life of gentility. Mr. Bennet relinquished all thoughts of expanding his holding and took refuge in his own particular chamber, relying on his books for good company and good sense.

But there was one marital responsibility that the new Mrs. Bennet did take seriously, and that was the begetting of a son. For her husband's estate could only be inherited by a male heir and would be entailed away from them to some unknown nephew if she did not produce one. Therefore a male heir was what they *must* have.

EVERY COUNTY in the kingdom could boast of having a wisewoman in such days, though their habitations were mysterious and their appearances unpredictable. No one could say why the wisewomen were always old and always had very bad teeth; there were those who said that it was but a disguise, and beneath the rags and wrinkles was a faery so beautiful that she would be too dazzling upon the human eye to safely behold. Some said that there was only one wisewoman in the kingdom, who could travel from the north to the south in the blink of an eye if she so chose, Many other stories and ideas abounded.

The new mistress of Longbourn considered herself to be once again in great luck, for, after making enquiries, she had learnt of a wisewoman residing not four miles away on the outskirts of the small hamlet of Thrushmore Downs. It was said that the wisewoman had first sought shelter on Mr. Hortley's land, but Mr. Hortley, being one of the richest farmers in the county and the most miserly of men, had driven her off despite the protests of his workers, who declared that she was a wisewoman and a member of the fairfolk. She had delivered babes and given excellent healing tisanes, and all who showed her kindness found their bread pan and their

milk cows twice as productive as usual, but Mr. Hortley would pay no heed. He was above the superstitions of the peasants; he was lord of his demesne, and no vagabond crone was going to live for nought on his valuable land. Off with her!

The predictable outcome of this was that Mr. Horton had since had shockingly bad harvests that summer and autumn, and all his root vegetables were riddled with holes when they were dug up and were fit only for the pigs. The wisewoman had moved on just a couple of miles and was welcomed by the cottagers at Thrushmore Downs, who knew better than to treat such a stranger with anything other than deference. It was an honour to have such a one amongst them, for the wisewomen showed themselves but rarely, and the cottagers rejoiced in the good fortune that came their way through the blessing of her presence. Widow Tibbs saw her two hens and one cockerel multiply by tenfold in a year, and there never were such good layers as those hens that had been hatched during that season. She made so much extra money at market from the eggs the second year that she was able to purchase an indenture for her eldest boy to the cobbler at Meryton and buy a pair of nanny goats to give milk for the younger children.

The inhabitants of Thrushmore Downs did their best to keep their resident wisewoman a secret, for if she were to be crowded about with people seeking her out, then likely she would move on. But the evidence of good fortune will seep out and be noticed, and a trickle of people from the villages about began to appear, asking the way to the wisewoman. Sometimes she could be found, and sometimes she could not. That was always the way with the fairfolk: they were as elusive as moonlight, and they appeared and disappeared according to their whims.

Mrs. Bennet was therefore very gratified to find the wisewoman sitting at Widow Tibbs' tiny cottage hearth, with all the Tibbs children laughing to see their numerous chickens clucking about the old woman's feet as though they were keeping company with her.

'Good morning to you, Mrs. Tibbs,' said Mrs. Bennet, tapping on the open cottage door and stepping in. 'Lovely day, is it not? I heard you had a wisewoman among you, and I wondered if I might trouble her with a request? My, are all these your children? Oh, chickens—upon my word—chickens in the house!'

Mrs. Bennet lifted up the hem of her gown, anxious not to get chicken muck on her clothes. 'Oh, put that back, if you please,' she said, turning to a

dark-eyed boy who had lifted a pie out of her basket. 'That's for the wisewoman, not for you. I'm sure your mother has told you not to take things that belong to other people!' She plucked a pilfered plum from another child and held her basket of goods to her chest out of reach.

'I've brought you some game pies and the plums from our own tree,' she said to the old woman at the fireside. She struggled through the swarm of hens and had to lift her voice above their cackle.

'Shall I take the basket from you, ma'am?' asked Widow Tibbs, wading through the chickens to take hold of it. 'Do take a stool, ma'am, and just push the cockerel off. I can't keep 'em out when our good mother is visiting, for the creatures do flock about her so. The goats would be in here too if they were not tied up.'

Mrs. Bennet tried to keep smiling and looking friendly, but it was not easy when there was a cockerel trying to peck at her ankles.

'What can I do for thee?' asked the old wisewoman, showing two rows of brown teeth as she made what might have been a smile.

'Oh, good mother,' said Mrs. Bennet eagerly, 'I was married a good year ago but have not yet had a child, and I must have a son, I *absolutely must*, and I would wish to purchase a charm or a potion or whatsoever you may have that will help me.'

'Must have a son,' repeated the old woman.

'Yes, good mother. A son. Please say you'll help me; I've tried all the usual methods. I take care to always sleep facing east when the moon is waning and west when it is waxing, though I do find when I wake up that I've rolled over. I eat plenty of parsley, and I put a pinch of salt and nutmeg in warm milk at bedtime. My dairy maid says that curds and black pepper are very good for getting boys, but I do think that sounds even more unpalatable than the salted milk, and I have never heard of such a thing before. Would it do any good, do you think?'

'A son,' said the old woman, stroking a white hen with black speckles upon her lap.

'If you please. A charm, a potion, anything—anything at all. I have money.'

The old woman closed her eyes, and Mrs. Bennet watched her carefully, waiting for her to speak. Some minutes passed by.

'I think she's asleep,' Mrs. Bennet said to Widow Tibbs. 'Should I wake her, do you think?'

She put out a hand but was reluctant to touch someone who was of the fairfolk. It would never do to act presumptuously with such people; they were liable to cast a curse if offended.

Mrs. Bennet waited some minutes more, trying to kick away the unfriendly cockerel that was determined to put a hole in her gown, while the Tibbs children giggled at her. Just as Mrs. Bennet was despairing of getting an answer, the old woman opened her eyes and showed her brown teeth once more. She opened her hand, and a white feather lay in it. She held out the feather to Mrs. Bennet.

‘Is it magic?’ Mrs. Bennet asked. ‘Should I put it under my mattress, or sew it into my hem?’ There was no reply. ‘Should I . . . eat it?’

The Tibbs children laughed.

‘ ’Tis just a little keepsake,’ said the old woman. ‘A feather o’ purest white, for a heart o’ purest thoughts.’

‘Purest thoughts?’ repeated Mrs. Bennet. ‘Will this give me purest thoughts that I might have a son?’ Her brow wrinkled in confusion. What with that wretched cockerel and those ragamuffin brats laughing at her and the old woman being so very vexing—Mrs. Bennet was beginning to feel exceedingly vexed herself.

‘A child pure o’ heart and beauty is a great blessing,’ said the old woman. She got up, still carrying the white hen under her arm.

‘I like the sound of beauty,’ said Mrs. Bennet, also getting up. ‘But if you please, good mother, I did most particularly request a boy. I really do need a boy because . . . ’

But Mrs. Bennet did not finish her request, for one moment the old woman stood in the open doorway of the tiny cottage, and the next moment there was nothing but a shaft of golden sunlight filled with dust motes shining in on the rush-covered floor. The brood of hens all clucked in disappointment and meandered out.

BEAUTY, ELEGANCE & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Mrs. Bennet's fears regarding the powers of the wisewoman were joyfully laid to rest a few months after her visit to her, for the physician was able to confirm that she was indeed with child. Those were happy months for the lady of Longbourn manor; she lay in state upon the sofa being waited on by her attentive housekeeper, Mrs. Hill. She sipped new milk that the baby would have good skin, she drank bone broth that the baby would have strong bones, she ate a vast quantity of sweetmeats that the baby would be sweet tempered, and she suffered to have beef steaks tied to her middle that her son might be strong and manly. Mrs. Bennet did everything right.

So how was it that the following spring she gave birth to a girl?

'A girl?' she cried, pushing her damp, mussed-up hair from her face as the midwife held out the swaddled bundle. 'A girl? It cannot be! Look again!'

Mr. Bennet was more philosophical when the announcement was made to him. 'A girl? Ah, well, Mrs. Bennet, plenty of time for a boy yet.' And he returned to his books.

The new arrival was named after her mother, and all who saw her marvelled so greatly at the beauty of the child that Mrs. Bennet was somewhat mollified, for little Jane Bennet was indeed a remarkably beautiful child. Such fair skin, such large eyes, such golden tresses as she grew. And was there ever such a sweet-natured child to be met with? Everyone agreed that there was not. Little Jane Bennet was a veritable angel.

Though Mrs. Bennet was pleased with her daughter's beauty, it did not assuage her pressing need for a son, and as soon as she felt recovered from the birth of little Jane, her mama went back to Thrushmore Downs in search of help.

MRS. BENNET WAS in possession of good fortune the morning she went in search of the wisewoman, for she found her sitting on a stile on the outskirts of the hamlet with a basket of kittens at her feet.

‘Good morning to you, good mother!’ cried Mrs. Bennet. ‘I am heartily glad to find you again. I beg you would help me, for you did not quite give me what I asked for last time, but perhaps you will be so kind this time? I’ve brought you a fruitcake and a good piece of cheese. I’d gladly bring you a whole cheese, but they are remarkably heavy and I could not carry it. Please, good mother, I beg of you—I have money. Give me a charm or a potion or something that I might have a son!’

‘A son?’ said the old woman, stroking a pair of kittens that had clambered into her lap.

‘Yes, yes, indeed—I *must* have a son!’

The old woman said nothing, but she stroked her cats. Some minutes passed by, and Mrs. Bennet grew impatient, though she did not like to press her.

Finally, the old woman held out a kitten: a dark brown little bundle with large, shining eyes.

Mrs. Bennet hesitated, but she dared not refuse. She took the kitten and looked questioningly at the giver.

‘A child with the playful ways of a kitten, the independence and quickness of a cat,’ said the old woman, showing her brown teeth.

‘Oh, that sounds very nice,’ said Mrs. Bennet. ‘A man ought to be independent and quick—very nice qualities indeed. But it will be a son, won’t it? I must have a son!’

But the wisewoman was gone.

THE BENNET MANOR was blessed a second time with the sound of a healthy baby’s cry. One-year-old Jane Bennet now had a sister: a dark-

haired child with shining eyes who was given the name of Elizabeth. All who knew her remarked on her extraordinary quickness in learning speech, her graceful movement even as a small child, and her manners being as pretty as a kitten's. Mr. Bennet merely concluded that there was plenty of time yet for a son. Plenty of time.

Mrs. Bennet would not give up hope, and she continued to seek out the wisewoman to beg for her help. On the third occasion, she found the old woman walking through Mr. Goodlison's farmlands with a gaggle of noisy geese waddling behind her.

'Excuse me, good mother!' called out Mrs. Bennet from a safe distance. She had never liked geese, having once been chased by a vindictive one as a child.

'I say, good day to you—if I might have a word?' She scurried after the old woman, clutching her basket of new bread and a fresh pat of butter. The old woman paused and turned round, the geese forming two sentry lines beside her, giving the occasional hiss and honk in the direction of Mrs. Bennet.

'I've two healthy daughters, and I'm most grateful to you for your blessing—especially for my eldest, for she is such a beauty—but if you wouldn't mind, good mother, I am in dire need of a son!'

'Thou shall have all the sons wished for,' said the old woman.

'Shall I? Oh, I am prodigiously glad to hear that!' And she dared take a step closer that she might receive a charm or potion or something of the sort, but the geese took affront at her advance and rushed towards her with such fierceness in their eyes that she shrieked, dropped her basket, and gathered up her skirts to run home. The new bread was eaten very quickly and gave much satisfaction.

Three-year-old Jane and two-year-old Elizabeth, or Lizzy, as she was commonly called at home, were joined by a new sister: Mary. There was not much to be said with regards to Mary among the neighbours. She had not the beauty of Jane, nor the charm of Lizzy. But she did show a remarkable propensity for books from a very young age.

On the fourth visit to the wisewoman, Mrs. Bennet's desperation caused her to lose her patience a little and insist that the old woman *make* her have a son! This resulted in the old woman promptly disappearing, and Mrs. Bennet went home full of foreboding. Her apprehension was correct. A fourth daughter was born nine months later. Her name was Catherine, but

such a grand name did not suit such an ordinary child, and she was ever referred to as Kitty. There were comments made that it was a shame that little Kitty had not the beauty of the eldest sister nor the quickness of Elizabeth. Neither did she have the studiousness of Mary. She was simply Kitty. As ordinary a child as any other.

On the fifth occasion, Mrs. Bennet begged the old woman's forgiveness for her hasty words the last time she had spoken with her, and she carried to her a pear tart and a wax-sealed bottle of very expensive cordial. After some suspense, the old woman showed her teeth and pointed at the pond they happened to be standing by. Mrs. Bennet looked into it and saw her own reflection.

'A child of your own likeness,' said the old woman before she disappeared.

A fifth daughter, Lydia, was born the following year—a handsome girl, and the favourite of her mother. It was widely agreed that such favouritism did the child no favours, for the baby of the family was allowed to run fairly wild.

Mrs. Bennet sought the wisewoman again and again, but in vain. She saw her no more. There were no further daughters and not one son. Mrs. Bennet did often declare to her neighbours and friends that she had been most horribly used by the old wisewoman. Five good wicker baskets had been given to her, and not once had she given Mrs. Bennet what she had requested. All she had to show for her efforts were five daughters and a cat. Mrs. Hill, her housekeeper, did remind her that the cat was worth its weight in wicker baskets many times over, for the kitchen pantries at Longbourn were the only ones she knew of that never had a problem with mice.

A REPUTED BEAUTY

‘I hope this evening does not turn out to be as dull as I expect it to be,’ said Caroline Bingley in a languid tone to her sister. She was sat before her looking glass while her maid put the finishing touches to her hair arrangement. ‘Why must Charles insist on us all going? There will be no one of any interest in such a rural town.’

‘I wonder that it is so *very* countrified,’ answered Louisa. ‘It is such a reasonable distance to London that one would think there would be *some* fashion to be seen.’ She patted her own elaborately styled hair as she looked at her reflection in Caroline’s glass. ‘But I looked into the milliner’s shop when Mr. Hurst and I walked out today, and the hats on display within—upon my word, Caroline—you would not believe how old-fashioned and dismal they were. I almost laughed out loud when the milliner came up and asked me if I wished to try one on!’

‘I have heard that there is a family of great beauties not three miles from us. Half a dozen or so sisters, each one more lovely than the last, so it is said. We shall at least have something to look at tonight.’

Caroline did not find the idea of a room full of beautiful young sisters very comforting. That was too much in the way of rivalry for her. ‘We must take our comfort in remembering that Charles can never stay in one place for long,’ she replied. ‘Mark my words if we are not back amongst *real* society by winter.’

Louisa agreed and was about to ask the maid to remove the extra string of pearls from her hair. There was no point in overdressing for a country

ball. But she changed her mind and left them in. Let the people of Meryton see how things should be done.

FITZWILLIAM DARCY WAS USED to being looked at with curiosity and admiration. Being tall and excellently dressed always enabled him to command every eye when he stepped into a room. But he took no pleasure in such attention; it was just how things were. He avoided eye contact with every person in the public hall as they walked through the gathering of laughing, chattering people. He heard the whispers and comments, all of the usual kind: people wondering who he was, and those who had gleaned some knowledge of him whispering back that he was a very rich man from the north. He heard the admiring comments on his good looks and his fine clothes, but he would not meet the smiles or acknowledge the curtsies and bows that greeted him in his progress through the ballroom. He procured two chairs for Caroline and Louisa and resigned himself to standing near them while Bingley immediately set off to greet everyone of his acquaintance. Bingley wasted no time in seeking introductions to the young ladies who caught his eye before whisking them off to dance in a cloud of good humour.

Mr. Hurst looked about, enquired if there were any card tables set up anywhere, and grunted in displeasure to hear that there were none. He wandered off in search of something to eat and drink to dull the boredom, declaring that balls were such tedious things.

Darcy agreed to lead Caroline in a dance and Louisa in a second, but he would not seek for any further partners, nor would he dance with Caroline a second time. He had long ago made it a firm principle never to stand up more than once with any lady at a ball. A second dance with a young lady always gave rise to gossip and speculation.

He noticed that Bingley, as usual, was dancing every dance; he was at that moment securing an introduction to a very good-looking girl with fair hair. Her gown was rather plain, but there was no denying that she was remarkably well looking. Quite a beauty, in fact. Darcy gave an inward groan. Bingley could not often resist a pretty face, and this one was prettier than any he had met with before.

Bingley caught up with him as he waited in line during a dance. 'Come, Darcy,' he said eagerly, his eyes bright from his pleasure and the exertion of

dancing. 'I must have you dance!'

Darcy squashed his friend's attempts. Both of Bingley's sisters were engaged, and he would not dance with a stranger. It would be a punishment to him, not a pleasure.

'I would not be so fastidious as you are for a kingdom!' cried Bingley. 'Upon my honour, I never met with so many pleasant girls in my life as I have this evening, and there are several of them you see who are uncommonly pretty.'

'You say that at every ball,' said Darcy. 'You are dancing with the only handsome girl in the room.' He nodded in the direction of his fair-haired partner.

'Oh! She is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld!' said Bingley. 'But there is one of her sisters sitting down just behind you who is very pretty, and I daresay very agreeable. Do let me ask my partner to introduce you.'

Darcy turned his head to see a young woman sitting quite close by. She was not fair like her sister, but dark. She was pretty, as Bingley had said, but she could not be compared to her sister. The young woman seemed to sense that Darcy was looking at her, for she turned her head and looked directly at him. There was a laughing and questioning expression in her look, and he immediately turned away, feeling annoyed that she might have thought him to be showing admiration. He always did his best never to give any young lady reason to think herself admired by him. Experience had taught him that doing so led to all kinds of trouble.

'She is tolerable,' he said dryly, 'but not handsome enough to tempt me. I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me.'

Bingley shook his head but heeded Darcy's suggestion in wasting no more time on him. Darcy watched him go and then felt a prickling sensation on the back of neck, as though someone were looking at him. It suddenly occurred to him that the young lady he had just announced as slighted might have overheard him, and he felt an irritation at the thought of being exposed in speaking in so un-gentlemanlike a manner. This made him even more vexed. He shrugged off the feeling but was aware that the young lady in question had now moved away and was talking animatedly to another

young woman. He could not be sure, but he thought he saw her mouth the words 'not handsome enough to tempt me' and laugh heartily.

For once he found himself agreeing with Caroline in her expressed hopes that her brother would not stay long in the country but would soon hurry back to London where there was good company to be found. In this provincial town, there was none whatsoever that he could see.

A HANDSOME GIRL

‘Charles, as your elder sister, I forbid you to say another word on the subject of Miss Jane Bennet.’

‘And as the master of the house, I refuse!’ said Bingley with good humour. ‘Who else is there to speak of? She is the most beautiful creature in the world!’

His sisters shook their curled and beribboned heads at him over the breakfast table.

‘You ought to take a lesson from Mr. Darcy,’ said Caroline, looking across the table at the said gentleman. ‘You never hear *him* rapturing over any young lady. He is the epitome of discretion and self-restraint.’

‘Darcy has never been in love,’ argued Charles.

‘You cannot know that,’ said Caroline, casting a surreptitious glance at Darcy. ‘Just because he has too much decorum to proclaim it to the world does not mean he has not known such sentiments. You presume too much, Charles.’

‘Let me ask him outright,’ said Bingley, ‘and settle the matter once and for all. Darcy—have you ever been in love, or have you, as I suspect, a heart of marble and ice?’

‘Oh, for shame, Charles!’ protested Louisa with a titter. ‘Mr. Darcy, do not encourage him by answering.’ She looked to her husband beside her to share the humour with him, but he was too engrossed in his mutton chops to take any notice of the conversation.

‘It is an easy enough question to answer,’ said Darcy, leaning back in his chair, having finished his meal. ‘The answer is no. I have never been “in

love,” as you call it. If such a condition exists outside of one’s imagination.’

Caroline’s smile of mirth slid from her face.

‘I agree that Miss Jane Bennet is a very sweet girl,’ said Louisa, ‘and I also agree that she is quite a beauty, even if she has little fashion and wears her hair in so naïve a style. Were she to have my own maid to arrange her hair and a fashionable gown put upon her, she would not look out of place in the best of circles, and that is all I will allow, Charles, or I will be encouraging you no end.’

‘I should not choose to have her covered in frippery and her hair full of feathers and baubles,’ declared Bingley soundly. ‘She is perfect as she is.’

‘Oh, Charles, you are positively incorrigible,’ said Louisa. ‘Mr. Darcy will have to take you in hand as he did the last time. If he had not talked sense into you, you would likely now be the husband of that fortune hunter from Bishop’s Gate.’

‘Hogwash,’ said Bingley cheerfully. ‘She was a very nice young lady, but I had not thought of marrying her.’

‘But she thought of marrying *you*,’ said Louisa with all the authority of an elder sister, ‘and had her scheming mama gotten her way, she’d have announced to the world that you had as good as engaged yourself to her daughter, and then you would have had an awkward time of getting out of it.’

‘Speaking of scheming mamas,’ said Caroline, recovering her composure after Darcy’s negation of any romantic sensibilities, ‘we must do our duty, Louisa, and return the visit to the Bennets this morning.’

‘Upon my word, *there* is a mother I would not wish upon any prospective son-in-law for the world!’ said Louisa. ‘She is positively vulgar. And the youngest Bennet girl is quite wild. But you are right, Caroline; we must do our duty. If it were only sweet Jane Bennet, it would be all pleasure. And the second sister, Eliza, is not a bad sort of a girl, though a little outspoken to my mind.’

‘She has not the sweetness of Jane Bennet,’ agreed Caroline.

‘I think they’re *all* charming girls,’ said Bingley.

‘What think you of Miss Eliza Bennet, Mr. Darcy?’ asked Caroline, keen to hear more of his acerbic comments, for he’d had nothing good to say of anyone in the neighbourhood as yet.

But Darcy did not answer. Instead he suddenly looked very serious, as though he were considering the matter deeply for some moments. Caroline

noticed his hesitation and looked carefully at him, trying to read his expression. She fancied he looked confused, and she wondered what it could mean. A niggling and unpleasant suspicion began to form in her mind.

He did not answer her but got up from the table, saying, 'Are you ready to ride out, Bingley?'

'Certainly,' said Bingley, also rising.

Darcy bowed politely to the ladies and said he hoped their morning would be more pleasant than they anticipated.

'Mr. Hurst?' said Bingley. 'Do you care for a spot of hunting this morning?'

Mr. Hurst waved his knife in the air dismissively and made a lunge for the platter of ham. The men left him to his meat and the ladies' gossip.

THE NEXT EVENING saw the Netherfield party make their fashionable way to the house of Sir and Lady Lucas, having accepted their invitation to a gathering there. Despite the titles of their hosts, the ladies of the party agreed that it was immediately apparent that their hosts were not of good breeding, nor of wealth or fashion.

Once inside the modest hall of Lucas Lodge, Darcy avoided as much of the conversation as he could, keeping himself distant from everyone, bar his own party. He recognised many of the local people, for there had been numerous dinners and dances the past weeks, but he knew none of the young men in military dress who were present from the local encampment.

As he stood sipping a glass of wine, he found himself looking about the hall for a certain person: Miss Elizabeth Bennet. At first he did not realise he was looking for her; it simply seemed that wherever she was, whomever she spoke to, wherever she moved to, he was acutely aware of it.

He watched her, absorbing the impressions she made upon him. She was not beautiful, he had decided, but there was something about her that captured his admiration. What was it? She had no features that were above being called pretty, and yet there was something about her eyes. They flashed and glittered. They were full of humour and life. She had no coyness, no false modesty. She did not flutter her lashes or give sidelong looks to the young men she talked with. Her looks were direct—bold, even. He had never seen a woman with such equal parts of boldness and

femininity before. They were not a fashionable combination, but they were intriguing, and they went some way towards entertaining him while he was subjected to such a tedious evening.

He continued in his own thoughts towards the lady, examining her with a critical eye. She was not fashionable in any manner of her person. She was not dainty and petite, nor tall and willowy, but he had to admit that her figure was light and pleasing. There was an active spirit about her, as though she were not made for sitting about, but for movement, for riding, for walking, for dancing. He allowed himself to acknowledge that he found that most attractive. Until that evening, he had not realised that the kind of woman he would desire as a partner would be one who could match him in his love of activity.

These musings were a little below his conscious mind. He only dimly perceived them. But he could not cease from them, and he found himself moving closer by degrees to where Miss Elizabeth Bennet stood, listening to her conversations, idly enjoying her playful talk and the sound of her voice and her laugh.

She was talking with a young woman, whom he recollected was Miss Lucas, the daughter of the house. He moved towards them, thinking that he would perhaps take the trouble to speak to Miss Bennet, but he found that he could not think how to begin. He was not used to beginning general conversation with strangers, and especially not with young women. He was used to others seeking him out and talking to him. Miss Bennet saw his approach, turned her dark, smiling eyes upon him, and spoke.

‘Did you not think, Mr. Darcy, that I expressed myself uncommonly well just now when I was teasing Colonel Forster to give us a ball at Meryton?’

‘With great energy, but it is always a subject that makes a lady energetic,’ he responded, without reflection.

‘You are severe on us,’ she replied with a smile before turning away again.

Her friend drew her away, insisting that she accompany her at the piano. Darcy watched her go and was soon absorbed in listening to her sing while her friend played. It was apparent that she had not studied under a singing master, as Georgiana had. But what she lacked in skill, she made up for in charm, and charmed he was while the singing lasted.

After two songs from Miss Bennet, one of the younger Bennet sisters took to the instrument to play and sing. She had no such charm to make up for the lack of proficiency in her performance, and Darcy moved away to escape from the grating sound. He enjoyed music immensely, and to be subjected to such poor quality was a vexation.

The singing ceased but was replaced by lively dance music, and the younger Bennet sisters and other young people took up an impromptu country dance, drawing some of the young squires and the duke's men in as partners. It was a riotous affair, and Darcy felt indignant to be made party to such a raucous evening. He was used to dignified parties where intelligent conversation, rather than country reels, were the usual manner of passing the time.

A loud and jolly voice at his shoulder made him start. It was Sir Lucas with his beaming, moon-like face. 'What a charming amusement for young people this is, Mr. Darcy! There is nothing like dancing after all. I consider it as one of the first refinements of polished society.'

Darcy was irritated by his booming voice in his ear, clashing with the second-rate music and the shrill laughter of the dancers. What did this man know of polished society?

'And it has the advantage of being in vogue amongst the less polished societies of the world,' he replied dryly. Sir Lucas looked a little puzzled. 'Every savage can dance.'

Sir Lucas smiled benevolently and raised his glass in a gesture of good cheer. Clearly the irony was lost on him. Sir Lucas complimented Bingley's dancing and was quite assured that Mr. Darcy's must be likewise excellent. He rattled on, and Darcy replied with brief answers, which did not curtail Sir Lucas's prattle.

'Ah, my dear Miss Eliza,' called out Sir Lucas. Darcy started on realising that Elizabeth Bennet was very near. 'But why are you not dancing? Mr. Darcy, you must allow me to present this young lady to you as a very desirable partner. You cannot refuse to dance, I am sure, when so much beauty is before you.' And taking Elizabeth's hand, Sir Lucas would have given it directly to Darcy, who was extremely surprised but put out his own hand, quite willing to take it.

Miss Bennet snatched back her hand, looking unsettled by the gesture.

'Indeed, sir,' she said to Sir Lucas, 'I have not the least intention of dancing. I entreat you not to suppose that I moved this way in order to beg

for a partner.' Her cheeks flushed a little.

'Miss Bennet, I should be very glad to have the honour of your hand,' said Darcy with a bow. He was surprised at himself for realising in that moment that he would indeed like nothing more than to have the opportunity of looking more closely into Miss Bennet's dark eyes in the intimate space of a dance.

'I thank you, sir,' she said, flushing more deeply, 'but I do not intend to dance this evening.' Her dark eyes flashed as she spoke.

Was she angry? How could she be? No woman had ever refused to dance with him before. He was a little perturbed, but the interchange only made her more intriguing.

Sir Lucas tried in vain to persuade her to dance, but she was resolute, and with a charming smile, she turned away, leaving Darcy watching her retreat. Sir Lucas looked apologetic and turned away himself.

'I can guess the subject of your reverie,' said a new voice at Darcy's shoulder.

'I should imagine not,' he replied to Caroline, still watching Miss Elizabeth as she moved across the room.

'You are considering how insupportable it would be to pass many evenings in this manner—in such society—and indeed, I am quite of your opinion. I was never more annoyed! The insipidity, and yet the noise—the nothingness, and yet the self-importance of all those people! What I would give to hear your strictures on them!'

'Your conjecture is totally wrong, I assure you,' he replied. 'My mind was more agreeably engaged.'

He wondered at himself even as he said the words. But he was keenly aware that he must keep checking Caroline's attentions. He would speak bluntly, as he was wont to do.

He continued, 'I have been meditating on the very great pleasure that a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can bestow.'

Caroline tilted her head to fix her eyes upon him. There was eagerness in her voice as she entreated him to tell her who the lady was who inspired such reflections.

'Miss Elizabeth Bennet,' he said without hesitation.

'Miss Elizabeth Bennet!' Her voice quavered and then grew a notch higher. 'I am all astonishment. How long has she been a favourite? And pray, when am I to wish you joy?'

He rebuffed her for her assumption that to admire a young woman equated to a forthcoming marriage. She teased him in a wry manner in return, asking him how he should like Mrs. Bennet for a mother-in-law and how well she would fit in at Pemberley. He let her carry on, aware of the edge of bitterness in her words. But all the while she continued in her flow of mocking humour, he continued to watch the lady in question and to wonder at himself for doing so.

DIRTY STOCKINGS

‘Darcy and I are to dine with the duke’s officers this evening,’ Bingley announced next morning. ‘The invitation extends to you, Mr. Hurst.’

Mr. Hurst considered this silently.

‘I hear the duke keeps a table fit for a king,’ his wife said encouragingly.

Mr. Hurst still looked undecided.

‘I only hope they do not play at dice for *too* long afterwards,’ she added.

That decided the matter. Mr. Hurst would go.

‘Caroline, shall we invite dear Jane Bennet to dine with us, seeing as we shall be all alone?’

‘Certainly,’ said Caroline. ‘I’ll send a note round directly.’

‘Excellent idea,’ said Bingley, looking pleased at his sisters’ attentions to his angel.

The note was duly written, and in the course of the morning, the footman returned with a note of reply. Miss Bennet would be delighted to dine with them.

DARCY AND BINGLEY returned to Netherfield after nightfall.

‘Why is Mr. Hurst not with you?’ asked Louisa as they entered the drawing room where the ladies sat after dinner.

‘He stayed on for some . . . entertainment,’ said Bingley.

‘You mean to play at dice long into the night,’ said Louisa. ‘Ah, well, as you say, it keeps him entertained. I have only given him two sovereigns for his allowance this month, so he can only stay until his pockets are emptied. Then I suppose he will find his way home, though he shall get no more coin out of me.’

‘Did you have an agreeable afternoon with Miss Bennet?’ asked Bingley.

‘Oh!’ exclaimed Louisa. ‘What a drama we have had, have we not, Caroline?’

‘Drama? What can you mean? Was all well with Miss Bennet?’ Bingley looked anxiously between his sisters.

‘The poor creature arrived in the midst of a most dreadful downpour,’ said Caroline.

‘On horseback,’ added Louisa. ‘With no suitable attire. What was her family thinking of? They ought to have sent her in a carriage.’

‘I daresay they do not own a carriage,’ said Caroline.

‘But what has happened?’ pressed Bingley. ‘How did she return home?’

‘She did not,’ said Caroline. ‘She was drenched through and seemed to grow most unwell as the evening progressed. We insisted she stay on till she felt better, but she barely ate a thing. In short, we have put her to bed in one of the guest chambers, and the housekeeper has been in and out with heated bricks and pans and extra blankets, for the poor thing cannot cease shivering.’

‘But this is dreadful!’ cried Bingley, clutching at his hair. ‘We must send for the apothecary!’ He moved to the door as though he were about to charge out into the night in search of the apothecary or to rush up to the guest wing to minister to Miss Bennet himself.

‘Be reasonable, Charles,’ said Louisa. ‘It would not be kind to call the apothecary out on such a wet night for a mere cold. Do be easy, Charles. I assure you, it really is but a common head cold. We shall keep her warm and comfortable, and she will doubtless feel better in the morning. I gave her my own special tincture, which is most efficacious in helping one sleep.’

Bingley was restless until the hour of bedtime. He gave orders to the servants that Miss Bennet was to be checked upon every hour—he would do it himself if it were not unseemly. No attention must be spared—and the apothecary most certainly must be sent for in the morning!

‘WELL?’ demanded Bingley. It was early morning, and he had been pacing up and down outside the guest chamber.

‘The young lady’ll do just fine,’ said his housekeeper. ‘She’s a sore throat and a headache and had best stay in bed. There’s a touch of fever, but it’s not a dangerous one, I assure you.’

Bingley looked relieved to hear that there was no dangerous fever, but even a little fever was enough cause for the apothecary being sent for.

He relayed the good news regarding the lack of a dangerous fever to the others when they wandered in for breakfast. They all agreed that it was good news indeed. It was just as Louisa had said, a mere head cold. Miss Bennet would no doubt be well enough to go home later that day, or tomorrow at the latest.

The party settled down to eat, and Caroline had barely begun buttering her toast before the door to the breakfast parlour was opened by a footman, and Miss Bennet was announced. Every eye turned to the doorway in surprise to see Elizabeth Bennet standing there, looking flushed and windswept and perhaps a little embarrassed to see them all still at breakfast.

‘Forgive my intrusion,’ she said in her clear voice, with a polite curtsy. ‘But I came directly to see my sister, for I understand she is unwell.’

Bingley broke the surprised silence and hurried to escort her to the table and to insist she take a chair. Caroline remembered her position as lady of the manor and gave orders to the nearest servant to provide Miss Bennet with a place setting. Louisa seemed half-amused, half-appalled by the unkempt appearance of their guest, and repeatedly said, ‘You surely did not walk all this way, Miss Bennet, surely not?’

Darcy found it difficult to keep his eyes from Elizabeth. Only the awareness that Caroline was watching his reactions closely kept him in check. He thought she looked handsomer than ever with her heightened colour, but he was a little appalled at the thought of her walking so far alone. He could not conceive of the idea of Georgiana walking for miles without a companion. What kind of parents were these Bennets that they sent one daughter out unprotected from the autumn rains and another so wholly unchaperoned? He felt a stir of pity for their defencelessness, and a desire to be Elizabeth’s protector began to bud. But then he dared to look

again at her, and on seeing the almost fierce independence in the flash of her eyes, he thought better of it.

Elizabeth thanked Mr. Bingley and his sisters for their kindness to Jane and insisted that she wanted nothing but to be taken to her sister. A servant was instructed to show her the way while the family continued with their leisurely meal.

Darcy caught the look between Caroline and Louisa when Elizabeth left the room. He heard Louisa's half-whispered words, 'Mud-spattered stockings!' as they stifled their laughter.

THE APOTHECARY PRONOUNCED the patient too ill to leave her bed that day. Possibly for some days hence. Bingley asserted that on no account was Miss Bennet to be moved until she was completely recovered. Elizabeth spent the whole of the morning and half the afternoon with her sister. At mid-afternoon, she told Miss Bingley, with an air of reluctance, that she must return home. She could not trespass on their hosts' kindness by staying any longer.

But Jane was so distressed at seeing her sister go that Caroline was forced to invite Elizabeth to remain. The servant was sent to fetch clothes and necessary items from Longbourn to bring back for the sisters, and so remain Miss Bennet did.

Elizabeth joined the party for dinner that evening.

'Miss Eliza, how is your sister?' Caroline enquired as they took their seats.

'She is not much improved,' said Elizabeth.

'Oh, I am so sorry to hear that,' said Caroline.

'Poor, dear girl,' said Louisa. 'It is shockingly bad to have a cold.'

'Indeed, it is,' said Caroline. 'I so despise being ill.'

'Poor, dear girl,' repeated Louisa. 'It quite takes away my appetite to think of her lying upstairs in such discomfort. Oh, is this the pheasant you caught, Charles?' A platter of fowl was presented by a footman.

'I daresay it was Mr. Darcy who shot it,' said Caroline. 'I am sure I do not know anyone with as good a shot as Mr. Darcy.'

Darcy would have spoken a word of condolence to Elizabeth regarding her sister, for he felt it was only polite to do so. But she was seated at the other end of the table between Bingley and Mr. Hurst, and though he often

looked at her, not once did he catch her eye. As soon as dinner was finished, she hurried back to her sister with Bingley's many messages of consolation and goodwill to carry to the patient.

The door to the dining room had barely closed before Caroline began abusing their guest. In her opinion, Miss Elizabeth Bennet had no manners, no style, no conversation, and no beauty.

Louisa agreed. 'She has nothing, in short, to recommend her but being an excellent walker.' They laughed. 'I shall never forget her appearance this morning,' said Louisa. 'She really looked almost wild.'

'She did indeed, Louisa. I could hardly keep my countenance. Very nonsensical to come at all! Why must she be scampering about the country because her sister has a cold? Her hair, so untidy, so blowsy!'

'Yes,' agreed Louisa, 'and her petticoat—I hope you saw her petticoat—six inches deep in mud, I am absolutely certain!'

'Your picture may be very exact, Louisa,' said Bingley, 'but this was all lost upon me. I thought Miss Elizabeth Bennet looked remarkably well when she came into the room this morning. Her dirty petticoat quite escaped my notice.'

'You observed it, Mr. Darcy, I am sure,' said Caroline, 'and I am inclined to think that you would not wish to see *your* sister make such an exhibition?'

'Certainly not!'

'To walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is, above her ankles in dirt and alone, quite alone! What could she mean by it? It seems to me to show an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country-town indifference to decorum.'

'It shows an affection for her sister that is very pleasing,' said Bingley.

'I am afraid, Mr. Darcy,' observed Caroline, leaning towards him and speaking in a half-whisper, 'that this adventure has rather affected your admiration of her *fine eyes*?'

'Not at all,' he replied. 'They were brightened by the exercise.'

Caroline drew back, and the humour vanished from her expression.

Louisa continued on in her catalogue of abuse of Elizabeth Bennet. Her parents were vulgar, and her connections were dreadfully low; her uncle was a mere country lawyer!

'Yes,' added Caroline, recovering herself to rejoin the mirth, 'and they have another uncle who lives somewhere near *Cheapside*.'

The sisters laughed heartily at this. Such a lowly address!

‘If they had uncles enough to fill all Cheapside,’ cried Bingley, ‘it would not make them one jot less agreeable.’

‘But it must very materially lessen their chances of marrying men of any consideration in the world,’ replied Darcy.

Caroline and Louisa nodded their agreement and exchanged pointed looks with him. There was an unspoken shared feeling among them that this was a fact that needed to be made clear to their brother. If he was thinking seriously of Miss Bennet, then he must consider just how inappropriate such an idea was.

Bingley made no answer, and the sisters resumed their tirade against the Bennets until they agreed it was time to see how their poor guest was doing. They tripped out of the room still entertaining themselves with their own wit.

Darcy wondered if he should take this opportunity to speak with Bingley further on the matter and advise him against any hopes he had regarding Miss Bennet. But he decided against it. He had seen his friend in love many times, and it had never gone as far as an actual proposal of marriage yet.

TWO ELEGANT LADIES

Elizabeth Bennet made another appearance in the drawing room later that evening. Darcy thought she looked a little pale and strained and would have liked to see Caroline, as hostess, make an effort to secure Miss Bennet's comfort, but Caroline did not exert herself other than coolly to invite her to join them all at playing cards. Elizabeth declined, saying that she could not sit long, for she desired to return to her sister shortly. She would read a while.

'Do you prefer reading to cards?' asked Mr. Hurst in astonishment. 'That is rather singular.'

'Miss Eliza Bennet,' said Caroline, 'despises cards. She is a great reader and has no pleasure in anything else.'

'I deserve neither such praise nor such censure,' protested Elizabeth. 'I am not a great reader, and I have pleasure in many things.'

'In nursing your sister I am sure you have great pleasure,' said Bingley, 'and I hope it will be soon increased by seeing her quite well.'

Elizabeth thanked him and bestowed on him what Darcy thought a very lovely smile. Darcy tried not to watch her, but once again he found a strange and uncanny thing happening to him whereby, without looking at her, he was acutely aware of every movement she made and of every word she spoke.

Bingley was now apologising to Miss Bennet for the small collection of books in the room. Caroline said that it was a wonder that their father had left so small a library, and she began praising Darcy's extensive library at Pemberley. This led to her praising Pemberley and its country in general

and urging her brother to build a house just like it and in the same part of the kingdom.

Elizabeth had put down her book and moved to the card table to watch the game, or, thought Darcy, to better listen to the talk of Pemberley. He had yet to meet with an unmarried lady who was *not* very interested in the details of his estate when the subject came up. It pleased him to think that Elizabeth was no less mercenary in her interest of him than any other young lady, for it enabled him to suppress the uncomfortable feelings that her presence aroused. If she were just as any other woman, interested in him for his wealth, then he could esteem her but lightly, and she would have no power over him.

Caroline turned her talk from Darcy's home to his sister. 'Is Miss Darcy much grown since the spring?' she asked him. 'Will she be as tall as I am?'

'She is now about Miss Elizabeth Bennet's height, or rather taller,' said Darcy, aware that his comparison would irk Caroline.

Caroline frowned but quickly recovered and began rapturing over Georgiana and her many accomplishments. Bingley declared that it was amazing how accomplished all young ladies were. Darcy objected to this, saying he knew no more than a half-dozen ladies that were truly accomplished, to which Caroline agreed heartily.

'Then you must comprehend a great deal in your idea of an accomplished woman,' Elizabeth said to him.

'Yes, I do comprehend a great deal in it.'

Caroline proceeded to reel off a long list of refinements that an accomplished lady must possess to hold such title. Darcy did not fail to notice that her list matched the very skills that she herself had been educated in: music, singing, dancing, and languages. She added to her list the possession of graceful movement and expression and tone, modulating her voice and straightening her posture as she spoke. He thought wryly of her sarcastic tone and ungracious expressions towards the Bennet family earlier that day and could not resist adding that such a lady must also add to this list the habit of extensive reading. He saw Caroline's brief scowl at this pointed reference, recalling Elizabeth's preference for reading over card playing.

'I am no longer surprised at your knowing only *six* accomplished women,' said Elizabeth in her clear voice. 'I rather wonder at you knowing any.'

Darcy broke his self-imposed rule and looked directly at her, receiving her steady gaze in return. There was an outcry from Caroline and Louisa against Elizabeth; they both knew *many* women who answered such a description. But Mr. Hurst shouted them down, demanding that they pay attention to the game. The conversation came to an end; Elizabeth soon rose and returned to her sister.

‘Elizabeth Bennet,’ said Caroline, the moment the door had closed, ‘is one of those young ladies who seek to recommend themselves to the other sex by undervaluing their own. And with many men, I daresay, it succeeds. But, in my opinion, it is a paltry device, a very mean art.’

‘Undoubtedly,’ said Darcy. ‘There is a meanness in all the arts that ladies sometimes condescend to employ for captivation. Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable.’

Caroline looked uncomfortable as though she were not entirely sure as to his meaning and was silenced for the time being on the subject of Miss Elizabeth Bennet and her failings.

NEXT MORNING BROUGHT the news that Jane Bennet was somewhat improved, followed by the announcement that Mrs. Bennet of Longbourn had come to visit her daughter.

‘What strange hours that family keeps,’ remarked Louisa, who had only just sat down to breakfast. ‘Most unsociable to call so early.’

‘I will take them to Miss Bennet,’ said Caroline, rising from the table. ‘And I suppose I must invite the mother in for refreshment when she has seen her daughter.’ She rolled her eyes at Louisa and went to attend to their guests.

Mrs. Bennet soon appeared in the breakfast parlour with her younger daughters trailing behind her. The youngest two were looking about at the furnishings, pointing and whispering and giggling between themselves. The elder daughter looked very prim by contrast and did not say a word. Elizabeth soon followed the party in.

‘I hope you did not find Miss Bennet worse than you expected?’ said Bingley, bowing to Mrs. Bennet on her entrance.

‘Indeed, I have, sir,’ she declared. ‘She is a great deal too ill to be moved. The apothecary says we must not *think* of moving her. We must trespass a little longer on your kindness.’

‘Removed!’ cried Bingley. ‘It must not be thought of. My sister, I am sure, will not hear of her removal.’

‘You may depend upon it, madam,’ said Caroline haughtily, ‘that Miss Bennet will receive every possible attention while she remains with us.’

Mrs. Bennet thanked them profusely—she did not know what would happen to her poor girl if she had not such good friends. She extolled Jane’s patience and longsuffering, her sweet temper—she was the best of girls, better than all her other daughters. She then turned her attention to the room and began praising the furniture and the aspect from the window; it was such a sweet room and Netherfield was altogether charming and the best manor in all the country. Mr. Bingley would not be quitting it in a hurry, she hoped.

‘Whatever I do is done in a hurry,’ replied he, ‘and therefore if I should resolve to quit Netherfield, I should probably be off in a moment. At present, however, I consider myself as quite fixed here.’

Caroline gave Darcy a look as though to say that being fixed at Netherfield was most disagreeable.

‘I am sure you agree,’ said Mrs. Bennet, addressing the company in general, ‘that the country about here is the best place in the world; you could not be fancying yourself in the city, I hope. I am sure you will never want to leave here now you have met so many good people.’

‘But in a country neighbourhood,’ said Darcy, ‘you move in very confined and unvarying society.’

‘But people themselves alter so much,’ argued Elizabeth, ‘that there is something new to be observed in them forever.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ cried Mrs. Bennet, ‘I assure you there is quite as much going on in the country as in town.’

She spoke with a tone of marked antagonism, and Darcy turned away.

‘For my part, I cannot see that the city has any advantage over the country,’ continued Mrs. Bennet loudly, ‘except the shops and the public places. The country is a vast deal pleasanter, is it not, Mr. Bingley?’

‘When I am in the country,’ he replied, ‘I never wish to leave it, and when I am in town it is pretty much the same. They have each their advantages, and I can easily be happy in either.’

‘Aye, that is because you have the right disposition,’ said Mrs. Bennet, ‘but *that* gentleman,’ looking at Darcy, ‘seemed to think the country was nothing at all.’

‘Indeed, Mama, you are mistaken,’ said Elizabeth. ‘You quite mistook Mr. Darcy. He only meant that there was not a variety of people to be met with in the country as in town, which you must acknowledge to be true.’

Darcy could see Elizabeth’s blush as she defended him. Caroline gave him a very expressive smile as though to remind him that all she had said of the vulgarity of the Bennet family had been too true. Elizabeth now made an obvious effort to turn her mother’s attention to a different subject and asked her if anyone had called at Longbourn in her absence.

Mrs. Bennet replied that Miss Lucas had called, and she then proceeded to laud the Lucases as a very good family, though the Lucas daughters were all very plain, nothing like her Jane, but then there never was anyone who could equal Jane in beauty. And she ran on relating all the admiration and near-proposals of marriage that Jane had received, looking pointedly at Mr. Bingley as she spoke. One gentleman had even written her poetry.

‘And so ended his affection,’ said Elizabeth, cutting short her mother’s ravings. ‘There has been many a one, I fancy, overcome in the same way. I wonder who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love!’

‘I have been used to consider poetry as the food of love,’ said Darcy, immediately regretting that he had spoken when Elizabeth fixed her glittering eyes upon him again.

‘Of a fine, stout love, it may be,’ she replied. ‘Everything nourishes what is strong already. But if it be only a slight, thin sort of inclination, I am convinced that one good sonnet will starve it entirely away.’

He would have replied, but stopped himself and merely smiled politely. It would not do to get drawn into the subject of love.

Mrs. Bennet gave effusive thanks once again to Bingley, who responded with great courtesy. Caroline exerted herself to make some civil comments, but her voice and manner were notably cool.

Just as the Bennet party was leaving, the youngest daughter said in parting, ‘Mr. Bingley, I hope you have not forgotten that you promised you would give a ball here. It would be the most shameful thing in the world if you did not!’

Mrs. Bennet laughed at her daughter’s precociousness.

‘I am perfectly ready, I assure you,’ Bingley replied. ‘And when your sister is recovered, you shall, if you please, name the very day of the ball. But you would not wish to be dancing when she is ill.’

The youngest Bennet daughter, a tall, good looking girl of fifteen years, laughed as heartily as her mother, and declared that she was very satisfied.

Mrs. Bennet and her daughters departed, and Elizabeth returned to Jane, while Caroline and Louisa enjoyed another scathing commentary on the Bennet family.

CONCEIT & IMPERTINENCE

Elizabeth Bennet spent a second evening at Netherfield while her sister recovered. Darcy determined to avoid the temptation of speaking to her during the course of the evening by immersing himself in writing a letter to Georgiana. Every conversation he had with Miss Bennet deepened the feelings of attraction he felt—ridiculous feelings that he resolved to reject.

It was not easy to write with Caroline at his shoulder, constantly demanding his attention and urging him to send little messages to Georgiana. When he finally put his quill down, Caroline moved to the piano and entreated Louisa to sing to her accompaniment. Elizabeth stood by the instrument, looking over the books of music, and Darcy once again found himself watching her. She seemed somehow vulnerable, standing apart from everyone, and so he moved near to her, not knowing what he would say. Caroline struck up a lively dance tune, and he heard himself saying, ‘Do you not feel a great inclination, Miss Bennet, to seize such an opportunity for dancing a reel?’

She smiled but did not reply.

He repeated the question, thinking she must have not heard him.

‘Oh!’ said she, ‘I heard you before, but I could not immediately determine what to say in reply. You wanted me, I know, to say “Yes,” that you might have the pleasure of despising my taste, for I know too well what you think of an impromptu country dance.’

He started, realising she must have noticed his disdain at Sir Lucas’s house.

‘But I always delight in overthrowing those kind of schemes,’ she continued, ‘and cheating a person of premeditated contempt. I have, therefore, made up my mind to tell you that I do not want to dance a reel at all. And now despise me if you dare.’

‘Indeed, I do not dare.’

She looked surprised, as though she had expected to offend him. But though her words were combative, she spoke them so playfully that he would not take offence but rather enjoyed engaging in a duel of words with her. He thought, as he looked at her, that if it were not for the inferiority of her connections, he would be in some real danger from this attraction.

They continued talking until Caroline shut the lid of the piano with rather more force than was needful, causing them to jump and startling Darcy out of his absorption with Elizabeth. He returned to the writing desk and tried to preoccupy himself against her.

The following morning, Caroline commandeered Darcy into taking a walk with her about the shrubbery. He knew he shouldn’t be amused by her obvious jealousy of Elizabeth, but he was, so he suffered her to tease him regarding the consequences of a future marriage to Miss Bennet. She wondered how he would manage to restrain his future mother-in-law’s tongue when once he was married; she speculated on how he would cure the younger Bennet girls of their wild manners and their constant flirting with the officers. She hoped he would be able to tame his new wife-to-be of her impertinent manners and her independence, for what kind of an example would she set before dear Georgiana?

‘Have you anything else to propose for my domestic felicity?’ Darcy asked, not at all offended by her, for though he was aware of being attracted to Elizabeth, he certainly had no consideration of her as the future mistress of Pemberley and a sister to Georgiana. He stopped short of insisting to himself that he did *not* wish to consider her as a wife, for when he did momentarily think of what intimacy it would bring to have Elizabeth Bennet as a wife, he felt something that made him feel decidedly uncomfortable. It was good to listen to Caroline’s prattle; it reminded him of why he had absolutely no intention of thinking seriously of Miss Bennet.

‘Of course, Miss Bennet will consider it a great triumph to catch you,’ Caroline continued. ‘For she has no dowry to speak of, and her father’s estate is entailed away on some obscure relative whom they have never met. Jane Bennet informed me of all the details.’

‘You mean you and Louisa extracted such information from Miss Bennet.’

‘What a triumph for her to move from having no expectations at all and no house or income to speak of, should their father die, to being mistress of one of the best estates in the kingdom! I daresay her mother and all her unmarried sisters will move in with you as soon as you are home from your wedding trip.’

Caroline was considering aloud how Darcy would like to have a tradesman from Cheapside for his new marital uncle when they rounded a corner and almost ran into Louisa and Elizabeth herself.

‘I did not know that you intended to walk,’ said Caroline to her sister in a high voice, as though she were embarrassed at the thought that Miss Bennet might have overheard her.

‘You used us abominably ill,’ answered Louisa, ‘running away without telling us you were coming out.’ And she took Darcy’s other arm and turned to walk with them. Elizabeth was left to trail behind. Darcy felt the rudeness of this and immediately said they should turn into the avenue where there was room for their party.

Elizabeth called back gaily, ‘No, no, stay where you are,’ and then turned about and walked quickly away in the opposite direction.

MISS JANE BENNET was recovered enough that evening to be able to make an appearance in the drawing room. She was treated with great civility by Caroline and Louisa, and even Mr. Hurst made a polite bow to her upon her entrance and said he was very glad to see her up and about again. Bingley insisted her chair be moved closer to the fire, and he sent out the servant for more wood for the already well-filled wood basket. He sent for a better blanket, a warmer shawl, the best wine, and a full platter of every delicacy the Netherfield pantries could supply, and then he sat down beside her and talked to no one else the entire evening.

Louisa sat near them, joining in their conversation occasionally. Mr. Hurst was very annoyed that no one wanted to play cards and lay down on a sofa, crossed his arms, and went to sleep. Darcy took up a book to distract himself from the temptation of talking to Elizabeth. Caroline did likewise and seated herself beside him, but she was continually interrupting him with little observations on how delightful it was to spend an evening with a

book. Eventually she tired of so much delight, cast the book aside, and looked about to see what other source of amusement she could find. Bingley was talking to Miss Bennet about the ball he had promised her youngest sister.

‘By the bye, Charles,’ Caroline called to him, ‘are you really serious in meditating on a dance at Netherfield? I would advise you, before you determine on it, to consult the wishes of the present party; I am much mistaken if there are not some among us to whom a ball would be rather a punishment than a pleasure.’

‘If you mean Darcy,’ Bingley cried, ‘then he may go to bed, if he chooses.’

‘I should like balls infinitely better,’ Caroline continued, ‘if they were carried on in a different manner, but there is something insufferably tedious in the usual process of such a meeting. It would surely be much more rational if conversation instead of dancing were made the order of the day.’ She looked at Darcy for his agreement.

‘Much more rational, my dear Caroline, I daresay,’ replied Bingley, ‘but it would not be near so much like a ball.’

Darcy said nothing in support of Caroline, so she tired of the subject and got up and began walking about the room.

‘Miss Eliza,’ she said, turning to Elizabeth, ‘let me persuade you to follow my example and take a turn about the room.’

Darcy lifted his head to watch Elizabeth, as she rose to join Caroline, and unconsciously closed his book.

‘Do join us, Mr. Darcy,’ said Caroline.

‘Why should you ask me?’ he replied. ‘I can imagine but two motives for you choosing to walk together, either of which would be interfered with by my joining you.’

‘What can he mean?’ cried Caroline, addressing Elizabeth but looking at Darcy. She was clearly delighted to have found a way to gain his attention. ‘I am *dying* to know what he can mean. Do you understand him, Miss Bennet?’

‘Not at all. But depend upon it, he means to be severe on us, and our surest way of disappointing him will be to ask nothing about it.’

But Caroline had no desire to disappoint Darcy, and insisted he explain what two motives he could be referring to.

‘Either you are in each other’s confidence and have secret affairs to discuss, or you are conscious that your figures appear to the greatest advantage in walking; if the first, I would be completely in your way, and if the second, I can admire you much better as I sit by the fire.’

‘Oh! Shocking!’ cried Caroline with glee. ‘I never heard anything so abominable. How shall we punish him for such a speech?’

Elizabeth suggested that she tease him and laugh at him. As an intimate friend, she must know how it was to be done.

‘But upon my honour, I do not,’ cried Caroline. ‘Tease calmness of manner and presence of mind! No, no—I feel he may defy us there.’

‘I am sorry to hear that Mr. Darcy is not to be laughed at,’ said Elizabeth, ‘for I dearly love to laugh.’

‘Even the wisest and best of men could be laughed at by a person whose first object in life is a joke,’ said Darcy.

‘Certainly,’ replied Elizabeth, the spark igniting in her eyes as she rose to counter him, ‘there are such people, but I hope I am not one them. I hope I never ridicule what is wise and good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies, do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can. But these, I suppose, are precisely what you are without.’ She spoke in a serious voice, but the humour showed in her eyes.

‘I try to avoid such weaknesses that often expose a strong understanding to ridicule,’ he said, enjoying the verbal parry with her. He had never met a woman who spoke to him in such a manner. Most young women fawned and flattered; they did not argue with him for entertainment.

‘Such as vanity and pride?’ she shot back.

‘Vanity is a weakness,’ he owned, ‘but pride—where there is a real superiority of mind—pride will always be under good regulation.’

Elizabeth turned her head away, but he saw her smile.

‘Your examination of Mr. Darcy is over, I presume,’ said Caroline coldly. ‘Pray what is the result?’

‘I am perfectly convinced by him. Mr. Darcy has no defect.’

‘I have faults enough,’ Darcy protested, ‘but they are not, I hope, of understanding.’ He found himself admitting, even as he wondered at himself for speaking so freely, that he did have a temper that was too little yielding. His good opinion, once lost, was lost forever.

‘Implacable resentment is a shade in a character,’ said Elizabeth, ‘but you have chosen your fault well. I really cannot laugh at it. You are safe

from me.'

Darcy hoped that this was true.

'Every disposition has a tendency to some particular evil,' he acknowledged, 'a natural defect, which not even the best of education can overcome.' An image of George Wickham came before him, causing him to speak the words most gravely.

'And your defect is to hate everybody,' said Elizabeth, with her disarming smile that took the sting out her words.

'And yours,' he replied with a smile of his own, 'is wilfully to misunderstand them.'

She looked like a fencing partner who had received a deciding blow and yielded graciously.

'Do let us have a little music,' cried Caroline, clearly tired of this conversation in which she had no share. 'Louisa, you will not mind my waking Mr. Hurst?'

'No, indeed,' replied Louisa, and the piano was opened.

Darcy was not sorry to have the interruption of music. He felt again the danger of paying Miss Elizabeth too much attention.

CAPTIVATING

The Bennet sisters remained one further day, and Darcy made certain not to engage in any more conversations with Elizabeth during this time. On one occasion, they were left alone during the course of the afternoon. He did not speak one word to her but remained fixedly reading his book. It had occurred to him that if he should engage with her, it might give her a false opinion of him. Every unmarried young woman he paid attention to quickly leapt to conclusions. Miss Bennet could not be so different from other ladies, and Caroline's sharp observations of the Bennet family's poor financial security made him aware of how very eligible a match he would seem to them. He would not give Miss Bennet any grounds for thinking that he admired her. Pointedly showing her no attention at all was for the best.

The sisters went home. Bingley sighed at Jane's departure; Darcy was relieved to see Elizabeth go. He did not enjoy the conflicting thoughts and feelings that her presence aroused.

DARCY WAS DEBATING WITHIN HIMSELF. He had no desire to endure Bingley's fast-approaching ball. He was weary of Caroline's unwonted attentions. He had no affection for Louisa, except that she was the sister of his closest friend, and Mr. Hurst could inspire no admiration or interest, even if he was the brother-in-law of Bingley.

And then there was Elizabeth. The very sight of her and the sound of her voice discomposed him. He was master of his own emotions; he was not as other men, fancying themselves in love because they had flirted a little with an attractive girl. So why did he feel such unsettling, foreign sensations when she was present? He would put an end to all this nonsense. He would return to London and join Georgiana in her establishment with Mrs. Annesley for a while.

He related his plans to Bingley as they rode through the town marketplace on their way to Longbourn. Bingley had persuaded him to accompany him in calling upon the Bennet family again to ask after Miss Bennet and be assured of her full recovery.

‘Leave!’ cried Bingley. ‘But we arrived little more than a month ago—we were to stay for the hunting season! I beg you would stay for the ball, Darcy, at the very least. My sisters would be bitterly disappointed if you did not dance with them, and I should think it most unfriendly to lose your company so soon. Do stay as planned.’

Darcy did not reply. He disliked being made to do anything that did not please him; he was used to having his own way and ordering his own plans. While he decided upon his answer, they rode on through the Meryton marketplace. A group of young people were gathered there, and Bingley called out that it was Miss Bennet and her sisters.

Miss Bennet and Elizabeth were stood with their two youngest sisters. A tall, heavy-looking young man in the black coat and cap of a clergyman stood beside Elizabeth. One of the duke’s officers was talking with them, and beside him, with his back to Bingley and Darcy, was another man, tall and graceful in figure and dressed as a gentleman in a long, blue coat. The party was talking animatedly, and there were a good deal of smiles from the elder Bennet sisters and a good deal of laughter from the younger girls.

Bingley turned his horse directly towards Jane Bennet and, on catching her eye, called out to her that he had just been on his way to enquire after her.

Darcy rode up and made a polite bow of greeting to Miss Bennet and was determining not to fix his eyes on Elizabeth when they were arrested by the sight of the tall gentleman in the blue coat. Darcy felt as though something had struck him, and for a moment he was dazed by the unexpected shock. The man in the blue coat flushed scarlet as his eyes met Darcy’s, then he touched his hat to him and made the slightest of bows.

Darcy did not know if he nodded or bowed or merely stared in reply: he was too appalled to have George Wickham standing before him to know what he did. He stared a moment longer, then abruptly turned his horse away.

‘What can be the matter?’ Bingley asked, catching up with him some minutes later. ‘You look dreadful, Darcy. Was it something to do with the tall fellow in the blue coat? He looked as though he knew you and was not happy about it.’

‘You guess correctly. That man is someone I hoped never to see again. It was a shock to see him here in Meryton. What can he be doing here?’

‘I did not know you had any enemies, Darcy. I always thought you to be the most obliging man in the kingdom!’

‘No, Bingley, that is a very good description of yourself. That man has made himself an enemy of mine by many means. I will not relate them all, for they involve other people’s secrets, but suffice to say that wherever he goes, trouble and dishonour soon follow. I am sorry, Bingley, but seeing him strengthens my resolve to go back to town. I will stay for your ball, as you wish it so keenly, but I leave the day after.’

THE DATE of the ball was fixed. The invitations were sent out. Bingley desired to personally deliver the invitation to the Bennet family and entreated his sisters to ride over to Longbourn with him, seeing as Darcy could not be prevailed upon to go.

‘Can you blame him, Charles?’ asked Caroline, speaking to her brother but looking at Darcy. ‘No one would willingly enter that house with such a mother prating on and all those silly, simpering girls. I do not know how you can bear it; the mother practically fawns all over you.’

‘I find them a very cheerful household,’ said Bingley. ‘I take no offence at a chatty woman and the sound of laughter, none whatsoever.’

Caroline sighed and shrugged her shoulders for Darcy’s benefit.

Darcy left Mr. Hurst to his snoozing and called for his horse. Riding hard across the countryside was the only time he felt some relief in his present state. His uncomfortable feelings for Elizabeth Bennet had not diminished, and now he had the added torment of hearing, via the gossip of

Caroline and Louisa, that George Wickham had joined the duke's regiment and was now the accepted suitor of none other than Elizabeth. It was clear that Caroline took great pleasure in this fact, if fact it was, and did not fail to relate before Darcy any snippet of information on the subject.

None of the party had any clue as to Darcy's antagonism towards Wickham. He had mentioned that Wickham had been the son of his father's steward and that he had known him as a boy, but it had been a long time since they were on good terms. That was all he would say on the matter. He would give no hint of Wickham's involvement with Georgiana; he would not even relate the matter to Bingley. It was too sensitive a subject. It would mortify Georgiana, and therefore himself, for anyone to know of it.

But to think of George pursuing Elizabeth Bennet gave him a heavy, knotted feeling in the pit of his stomach. He wanted to warn her, to tell her that she must put no confidence in that man, but how could he? What a presumption it would seem. He reminded himself that Miss Bennet had no fortune that could tempt George beyond a mere flirtation, and from what he had seen of her, he was sure she was not a young lady to be led into any imprudent relationship with the likes of George Wickham. Or so he hoped. Wickham's charm with young ladies seemed boundless.

But he would not dwell on such thoughts. What was Elizabeth Bennet to him? She was nothing but a passing acquaintance. He would not think of her. And so he rode hard, dulling the memory of her and of George Wickham under his horse's hooves until he had wearied himself and his horse for another day.

CAUSES OF DISQUIET

‘I wonder whom I will dance with first tonight?’ said Caroline wistfully, patting her elaborate headdress.

Darcy, feeling a little more magnanimous towards her in the knowledge that he would be leaving Netherfield next morning, obliged her by offering to dance the first two dances with her. She beamed with delight and took his arm, clinging tightly as though such an offer were as good as securing her to him forever, and not merely for the first half-hour of the ball.

‘Here they come,’ said Louisa in her high voice, looking out of the window at the entrance path where their guests were dismounting from horses and carriages. ‘And first to arrive is the Bennet family,’ she announced.

Bingley bounded to the window and made an exclamation of satisfaction upon seeing Jane Bennet walking gracefully up the path.

‘What a shame they have not a maid who knows how to arrange hair,’ said Louisa, watching the Bennet sisters.

A party of the duke’s officers rode up, their scarlet capes flying behind them. There were some squeals of pleasure at the sight of them from the youngest Bennet sisters.

‘I am sorry if that Wickham fellow should turn up,’ Bingley said to Darcy. ‘I made a general invitation to the officers, but I couldn’t very well single out one officer and bar him.’

Darcy gave a tight smile in reply, not wanting his friend to be uncomfortable on his behalf. Would Wickham be bold enough to turn up, knowing that he was present? He had no doubt that he would. But then, if

Wickham were set on making a good impression among his new fellow officers, he might not want to run the risk of a confrontation with him. He must know that the state of affairs between them was as a heap of dry tinder; it would only take the smallest of sparks—a careless word, a sly remark—and there would be a conflagration that would certainly cause much damage. Darcy watched the officers as they dismounted and strode up the entrance path to the manor. He could see no tall young man with chestnut waves and hazel eyes and an impudent smirk among them.

The Bennet ladies were not the first to enter the ballroom. They would have been directed to a chamber set aside for female guests and their maids, where they might make the necessary adjustments from travelling attire to ballroom splendour.

The ballroom was busy with officers and gentlemen when the Bennet party entered. Bingley's face lit up at the sight of Jane, and he proceeded to neglect every other lady in the room in his preoccupation with her.

As Jane Bennet moved away upon the arm of Bingley, her sister Elizabeth came into view. Darcy's eyes went directly to her. He had never seen her look so well; she had certainly taken care over her appearance that evening. She was looking about the room, seeming to examine every scarlet-coated gentleman as though she were searching for a particular face among them. Her youngest sister ran up to relate some news to her, and an unmistakable look of disappointment appeared on Elizabeth's face. She turned to speak to Miss Lucas until her conversation was interrupted by the tall, heavy, young man who had accompanied the Bennet party to the ball. The man bowed to her, spoke with florid gestures, and led Elizabeth to the floor as the music for the first dance began.

Darcy thought that Elizabeth Bennet did not look as though she were enjoying the first two dances with the black-coated young man. The man was certainly clumsy and ungainly, as though he'd had little practice at dancing. He saw her wince as her partner trod on her thin-slippered foot with his heavy shoes.

'I see you are observing your favourite young lady,' Caroline said in a sharp voice. Darcy started and felt a pang of conscience at his rudeness. He was dancing with Caroline and looking at Elizabeth, who was further down the line.

'It is some family connection she is dancing with,' said Caroline. 'A clergyman. It is said that he wishes to marry her. I imagine it would be a

most prudent match for her, for he is to inherit her father's estate.'

Darcy looked again at the partner of Elizabeth. He wanted to protest that such an oafish young man could not dare to think himself worthy of Miss Bennet, but he checked himself and looked away.

'What a lucky young woman she is,' continued Caroline, 'to have *two* young men courting her, as well as being the object of admiration of a man such as yourself. I wonder which of you all she shall deign to gather into the Bennet family fold? A gentleman, an officer, or a clergyman?' She laughed.

Darcy would not gratify her with an answer. He found nothing amusing in the matter. He could only feel some gladness that Wickham had not come. To see Miss Bennet dancing with an oafish suitor was one thing; to see her enjoying the charms of Wickham would have been more than he could have borne.

He determined to keep all his attention on his partner while he next danced with Louisa, but after leading Louisa back to her party, some reckless urge caused him to make his way through the clusters of guests until he reached the alcove where Elizabeth was talking to Miss Lucas.

Both ladies looked up as his shadow fell upon them. Before either of them could greet him, he heard himself saying, 'May I have the honour of your hand for the next dance, Miss Bennet?'

Elizabeth looked startled, but she immediately replied that he could. He bowed and walked away, wondering to himself what rash impulse had caused him to do exactly what he had determined not to. It would do no harm to dance with her, he argued. He would be leaving in the morning, and they would never see one another again. There could be no danger of her misinterpreting his attentions after just one dance. And besides, she had other suitors; she would not take his attentions amiss.

Darcy was vaguely aware of the looks and whispers around him as he took his place opposite Elizabeth for the dance, but he gave no heed to them. No doubt they were excited by him dancing with a lady other than Miss Bingley or Mrs. Hurst.

He was used to his partners making all the conversation; he was used to young ladies striving to amuse and entertain him. He had never acquired the skill of making shallow conversation. He could talk in depth on any subject that interested him, and he could enter into banter with those whom he knew well, but he had never enjoyed or been proficient in shallow talk. He

was glad to leave that to others. He expected that Elizabeth would soon begin, but she was strangely silent, and he could not think how to instigate conversation.

A third of the dance had passed before Elizabeth made some slight observation on the dance. He nodded in reply. More silent minutes passed by as they circled their steps, then waited for their turn down the line. 'It is *your* turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy,' she said finally. Her dark eyes flashed with a wry humour. 'I talked about the dance, and you ought to make some sort of remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples.'

He smiled politely. 'Do you talk by rule, then, while you are dancing?'

'Sometimes. One must speak a little, you know. It would look odd to be entirely silent.'

'Are you consulting your own feelings, or do you imagine that you are gratifying mine?'

'Both,' said Elizabeth archly, 'for I have always seen a great similarity in the turns of our minds. We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room and be handed down to posterity with all the *éclat* of a proverb.'

She was teasing him, but he did not mind in the least.

Their turn came again to make the quick steps and circling movements down the line, and then they stood opposite one another again waiting their turn. More minutes of silence followed until he made an exerted effort at civility. 'Do you and your sisters often walk to Meryton?' he asked.

'We do. When you met us there the other day, we had just been forming a new acquaintance.'

He immediately stiffened at this allusion to Wickham. He did not trust himself to reply. She seemed to regard the change in his expression, and she said no more.

At length he spoke, and in a constrained manner said, 'Mr. Wickham is blessed with such happy manners as may ensure his making friends—whether he may be equally capable of retaining them is less certain.'

'He has been so unlucky as to lose your friendship,' she replied with emphasis, 'and in a manner which he is likely to suffer from all his life.'

So Wickham had spoken to her of him. No doubt he had spun her a tale of half-truths, if not blatant lies. He would not answer on the subject—it

was the one subject in the world that he least desired to speak on.

Someone was bowing to him at his side, and he turned his head to see Sir Lucas with his wide smile and red face.

‘Allow me, sir, to compliment you on the superiority of both your dancing and your choice of a partner,’ he said ebulliently with another deep bow. ‘I have been most highly gratified, my dear sir. Such very superior dancing is not often seen. It is evident that you belong to the first circles. Allow me to say, however, that your fair partner does not disgrace you, and that I must hope to have this pleasure often repeated, especially when a certain desirable event takes place. What congratulations will then flow in!’

Darcy followed the careful nod of Sir Lucas to see that he indicated Bingley and Jane Bennet, who were dancing down the line at that moment.

‘But let me not interrupt you, sir. You will not thank me for detaining you from the bewitching converse of that young lady, whose bright eyes are also upbraiding me.’

Darcy did not acknowledge him, for he was still looking intently at Bingley and Miss Bennet. It struck him forcibly in that moment that the people around them were all assuming that an engagement between the couple was imminent. This was serious. It was not the first time it had happened to Bingley, but that did not make it any less significant, especially as Bingley seemed more deeply captivated by Miss Bennet than by any previous amour.

He recovered himself and turned his attention back to his partner. ‘Sir William’s interruption has made me forget what we were talking about.’

‘I do not think we were speaking at all. Sir William could not have interrupted two people in the room who had less to say for themselves. We have tried two or three subjects already without success, and what we are to talk of next I cannot imagine.’

‘What think you of books?’ asked he, smiling.

‘Books—oh! No. I am sure we never read the same, or with the same feelings.’

‘I am sorry you think so,’ he replied, not sorry at all. ‘But if that be the case, there can at least be no want of subject. We may compare our different opinions.’

‘No,’ she said breezily. ‘I cannot talk of books in a ballroom; my head is always full of something else.’

She was silent for a moment, and then she startled him by saying in an altered tone, 'I remember hearing you once say, Mr. Darcy, that you hardly ever forgave: that your resentment, once created, was unappeasable. You are very cautious, I suppose, as to its being created?'

'I am,' he said firmly, wondering what she was alluding to.

'And never allow yourself to be blinded by prejudice?'

'I hope not. May I ask to what these questions tend?' He had a disturbing notion that her questions tended towards the person of George Wickham.

'Merely to the illustration of your character,' she said. She seemed to shake off whatever serious mood had briefly come upon her, and the smile returned to her eyes. 'I am trying to make it out.'

'And what is your success?'

She shook her head. 'I do not get on at all. I hear such different accounts of you as puzzle me exceedingly.'

She must be referring to Wickham. He felt a stony anger rising towards the man who had doubtless been spreading falsehoods in her hearing.

'I would by no means suspend any pleasure of yours,' he replied coldly.

She looked a little surprised by his change of manner, and she spoke no more to him as they completed the dance and parted in silence.

FOLLIES & NONSENSE

The evening was proving to be as unpleasant as Darcy had anticipated. He was brooding over unpleasant recollections of George Wickham while drinking down a glass of wine when he heard a polite ‘ahem’ behind him. He turned round to see the double-chinned face of the young clergyman who was said to be pursuing the hand of Elizabeth Bennet. Darcy stared at him as the man made an ornate and solemn bow.

‘Pardon me, sir; pray forgive my presumption on addressing you so singularly, but when you hear the purpose of it, I trust you will agree that my motives are for a most worthy cause.’

In the course of the long speech that followed this introduction, Darcy gathered that this man was the new parson that his aunt Catherine had appointed. He was now taking it upon himself to inform him that Lady Catherine had been well a fortnight ago.

‘Very good, sir. Glad to hear my aunt is well,’ Darcy replied curtly.

‘Ah, I knew you would not resent my application to you in so informal a manner when you knew of whom I desired to speak. I knew, my good, dear sir, that even the smallest note of information regarding your illustrious aunt would justify such a departure from the usual rules of etiquette, which I most fully honour and regard in every circumstance and have only breached by the greater significance of the desire to acknowledge my esteem to any person who is connected to my most noble patroness.’ He bowed deeply again. Darcy nodded and turned away, feeling annoyed. He had no patience for pomposity that evening.

His mood was not improved by finding himself seated almost opposite Mrs. Bennet at supper. Throughout the meal, he had to endure overhearing her triumphant boasting from across the table. She seemed to think she was whispering to her neighbour; whether she was a little hard of hearing or had drunk a little too much wine, he could not say, but her whisper was loud enough to reach him.

She gloated to her neighbour of the very great catch her eldest daughter had made in securing Mr. Bingley. He was so very charming, he was so handsome, he was so rich—what a fine thing for her daughter! Indeed, what a fine thing for all her girls, for having Jane so advantageously married would throw her sisters into the paths of other rich men!

What a good thing it would be to have Jane settled so near—think of it, only three miles away—and how well Jane would look as mistress of Netherfield. She always knew that Jane could not be so beautiful for nothing. She had been given a charm by a powerful wisewoman before Jane was born, a charm that gave her child the gift of beauty—and wasn't she a beauty? Was there any other girl in the county who could match her? She thought not. Mr. Bingley was very lucky to get her, and he would not see any young woman who could compare to her anytime soon, not even in the city!

'But it is not merely her beauty, Lady Lucas,' Mrs. Bennet assured her neighbour, 'it is her sweetness of temper. She has always had the most obliging temper, even as a child. But no love charm or anything of that sort has been used to attract Mr. Bingley. I would not stoop to using charms in *that* quarter, unless they were absolutely necessary, even if I knew where to procure one from. There has not been a wisewoman seen about the county these sixteen years, has there?'

Lady Lucas shook her head, then nodded it as though she did not know what question she had been asked, but she did not let her confusion interfere with her enjoyment of her soup.

'My mother used a charm to secure Mr. Bennet for me,' said Mrs. Bennet with a merry laugh. 'She put it in his tea when he came to call! I was not entirely happy about it, but there was no reasoning with Mama when she set her mind to something. And she set her mind to my having Mr. Bennet, for he was quite a catch and very handsome. He was *very* handsome then; I used to think that the only thing that could make him more handsome would be for him to be dressed in regimentals. I always

admired a man in regimentals; it is the scarlet coat and cape. *So dashing*. He is still a handsome man for his age, do you not think?’

Lady Lucas murmured something and dabbed at her mouth with her napkin.

‘Perhaps it is a pity Mama is not here to procure such charms, but I daresay Jane will be mistress of Netherfield before many more months have passed without the need for such things. Oh, I shall be quite at home here—why, I feel as though I am almost at home already!’ She laughed gleefully and drew forward a platter of pheasant towards her as though she already considered the silver of the house and the game of Netherfield Park as good as her own.

Darcy quite lost his appetite in hearing this unchecked torrent of speech. He looked across the table at Bingley, but he was engrossed in talking with Miss Bennet and had clearly heard nothing of Mrs. Bennet’s conversation. He caught the eye of Elizabeth Bennet without meaning to. He thought she looked vexed and rather flushed. More than once did he see her lean toward her mother and whisper something to her with a look of urgency, but her mother waved her away impatiently and scolded her for being nonsensical.

When Darcy was not looking at Elizabeth, he was looking at her sister Jane. He wished to determine whether or not the young lady returned Bingley’s affections with equal ardour. He watched her closely. She smiled a good deal. She appeared to enjoy Bingley’s attentions, but there was a manner of coolness about her. There was a detachment, an air of serenity. She did not look like a young woman in love, but merely a young woman enjoying the pleasures of an attentive partner at a ball.

Supper was drawing to a close, but the hum of the table chatter was suddenly broken by the sound of the piano striking up—and striking up on a false note. There were a few titters at this jarring sound, and more subversive chuckles as the hapless musician began to sing to her own accompaniment. Darcy winced at the sound of the brittle, untrained voice. He was used to hearing the very best calibre of musicians; this young lady was a positive insult to Bingley’s home. He saw Elizabeth Bennet pass a hand over her eyes as though she wished to blot out the sight of the performance. Little wonder, he thought, when the young lady at the piano was her younger sister. Was there ever such a family for exposing themselves?

When the Bennet girl had sung two songs and begun on a third, her father hurried up to her and declared loudly that she had delighted the party long enough! There were ripples of laughter along the table, and the Bennet girl looked mortified as she was halted mid-note and made to gather up her music and vacate her chair.

Darcy could see Louisa and Caroline making signs of derision to one another, but Bingley was blissfully unaware of anything amiss.

‘If I were so fortunate as to be able to sing,’ said a loud voice, ‘I should have great pleasure, I am sure, in obliging the company with an air!’ It was the impudent clergyman, who went on to give a sermon on the innocence of the diversion of music, insomuch as it did not demand too much of the musician’s time from more spiritual matters. He continued his sermonising with an account of what a good clergyman’s duties were to be in the place of learning to sing and play music, and he concluded his speech with a pointed reference to his patroness and her family connections and a deep bow to Mr. Darcy from across the table. There were many stares and many smiles of amusement from the guests. Darcy did not feel amused.

The interminably long evening finally drew to a close. The Bennets were the last to leave, Mrs. Bennet managing to draw out her departure as long as she could. She repeated her declarations of it having been the most delightful of evenings, while the equally garrulous clergyman echoed and expanded on her every sentiment. The youngest Bennet sister yawned repeatedly without remembering to cover her mouth.

Caroline and Louisa maintained a cool silence as they waited for their guests to leave. Elizabeth Bennet was likewise silent. She looked as though she had gained as little enjoyment from the evening as he had done.

‘I think everything went very well, Charles,’ said Caroline, when the manor door was shut. ‘It was not the elegant evening we are used to, but I think we have shown our neighbours how things ought to be done, for a mere country ball.’

Louisa nodded in agreement.

‘I thought it was a most delightful evening,’ said Bingley. ‘And now I shall take myself off to bed to sleep what little is left of the night.’ And he left the ballroom.

‘Have you seen Mr. Hurst?’ Louisa asked, looking round.

‘I believe he is asleep in the library,’ Darcy said. ‘The butler did ask if he ought to wake him.’

‘Oh, no, leave him where he is,’ said Louisa. ‘He will only start troubling the servants for breakfast if he is woken, even if it is two in the morning.’

‘And what was your opinion of the evening, Mr. Darcy?’ Caroline asked. ‘Did you enjoy the entertainment so kindly supplied to us by the Bennet family?’

‘And their resident clergyman,’ added Louisa. ‘Did you ever see such a ridiculous man?’

‘What a fine husband he will make for our Miss Eliza,’ said Caroline.

‘Do you think the elder Miss Bennet returns Bingley’s regard?’ asked Darcy suddenly. He spoke in a low and grave tone. ‘Do you think there is a real danger for your brother?’

‘I think there is a very real danger of Charles blurting out a rash proposal to Miss Bennet,’ said Caroline.

Louisa looked thoughtfully over her fan, which she was holding up to hide her yawns. She snapped her fan shut. ‘We must get him away before it is too late,’ she said. ‘Do you agree?’ She looked between Darcy and Caroline. They agreed.

‘It would be insupportable for him to marry into that family. Can you imagine, Louisa? They would be here at every dinner engagement, every ball, tagging along with their country fashions and their shocking manners.’

‘It cannot be,’ said Louisa. ‘You must persuade him to ride back to London with you tomorrow, Mr. Darcy. You will think of some imperative reason for him going. Caroline and I will arrange the household affairs here and follow on directly. It will be no difficulty to keep him in town once we are all there and he is back among his real friends.’

‘But what if he insists on coming back?’ asked Caroline. ‘He may fancy himself more in love than ever if he is parted from Miss Bennet. Absence sometimes makes such feelings stronger, I have observed. You must speak to him, Mr. Darcy. He will listen to you above anyone else.’

Darcy nodded thoughtfully. And the plan was agreed.

LOVE & SCHEMES

‘Are you sure?’ Bingley spoke in a voice of utter misery. He sat crumpled up on the sofa in his London house with Darcy standing before him and his sisters seated either side.

‘Absolutely sure,’ said Darcy.

‘I am so sorry, Charles,’ said Louisa in a maternal tone. ‘We did think of her as quite the sweetest girl in the world, but Mr. Darcy is quite right in what he says. Miss Bennet is not in love with you. I can vouchsafe for that.’

‘But we got along so well. We were as one mind. I felt as though I had known her all my life!’

‘Feelings can be deceptive,’ said Darcy. ‘It is easy to fancy that they are reciprocated when they are not.’

‘You will meet with someone who is worthy of you very soon, Charles,’ said Louisa. ‘Why, there is not a girl in all London who would not think herself the luckiest girl in the kingdom to have you. I happen to know that Miss Honoria Milkwood is already in love with you.’

‘And think of the elegance and accomplishments of Mr. Darcy’s own sister,’ said Caroline. ‘When you compare her to Miss Bennet, you must own that there is a world of difference between them. Let Miss Darcy be your model of what a young lady who is worthy of your attention ought to be.’

‘But I don’t want any other young lady,’ said Bingley. His usual jollity was quite crushed.

Louisa patted his hand. ‘She is a very sweet girl, Charles, but consider her situation, her family, her lack of connections. Consider how

disappointed all your friends and relations would be to see you fail to make the excellent match that you deserve. It is better that it should be this way.'

'If I have no objection to her situation and her family, then I don't see what business it is of anyone else!' said Bingley in an almost fierce tone.

'But she would not have you, Charles,' said Caroline quietly but firmly. 'Louisa and I spent as many hours in her company as you did, and it is our decided opinion, and Mr. Darcy's, based on his own observations, that Miss Bennet had no thoughts or expectations of matrimony. She liked you very well, but not in that regard.'

Louisa nodded gravely and patted her brother's hand again.

Bingley was quiet for some minutes, and then he got up and walked dejectedly to the door.

'Where are you going, Charles?' asked Louisa.

'For a ride,' said Bingley in flat voice.

'Do go after him, Mr. Darcy,' urged Caroline. 'He might take it into his head to ride all the way back to Netherfield. You know how impulsive he can be.'

'He will not return to Netherfield,' Darcy assured her. 'He has too humble an opinion of himself to disbelieve that the lady does not return his feelings. He will not go back to her, I assure you. We have seen the last of the Bennet family.'

'Thank goodness!' exclaimed Caroline, and she and Louisa laughed. Darcy turned from them. He did not find any amusement in the present scene; it was an unpleasant affair at every turn. He was sorry to see Bingley so disappointed, but it was for the best. Bingley would thank him for what he had done one day.

A MONTH PASSED, and Bingley recovered some of his usual humour, but not all. And of the good spirits he showed to his friends and sisters, Darcy suspected that a large part was contrived. Bingley had certainly been laid low by his romantic disappointment. This was unprecedented, for he usually forgot one angel the moment he met with another, but it seemed there was none other that could supplant Miss Jane Bennet. Neither Miss Honoria Milkwood's eager admiration nor Miss Felicity Ponsonby's large dowry

awoke him from his despondency. Not even Miss Charlotta Spencer's pretty manners and features could rouse Bingley to dance more than once with her. He seemed very fond of Georgiana and agreed with his sisters that she was the most accomplished young lady of their acquaintance, but his admiration was that of a brother to a younger sister. It would appear that not even the handsome, accomplished, and wealthy Miss Georgiana Darcy could compare with Miss Jane Bennet in Bingley's mind.

'MR. DARCY,' said Caroline in a voice that spoke of alarm, 'I have been waiting to find you alone all morning. I have just received a most unwelcome piece of news.' She held up a letter. 'It is from *her*.'

Darcy raised his eyebrows in query.

'Jane Bennet. She writes to tell me that she is here.'

'Here?'

'In London. She is staying with her uncle and aunt in Cheapside.' Caroline gave a little shudder. 'What shall we do? He must not see her; it might set him off all over again, and he has only lately recovered from the affair.'

Darcy agreed. In his opinion, Bingley had not recovered at all. It would certainly not do to let the acquaintance be rekindled. 'We must keep this knowledge to ourselves,' said Darcy.

'I was sure you would think so,' said Caroline. 'I knew we would be of the same mind, as we nearly always are. It shall be *our* secret. I only hope she does not take it into her head to call on us without notice; that would be quite dreadful. You must keep him occupied between the hours of breakfast and noon, for that is when she is most likely to call.'

Darcy did so, and Caroline's words proved prescient, for a week later Caroline reported to Darcy that Miss Bennet had called upon her that morning. 'I shortened the visit as much as I could,' she assured him. 'Louisa and I made a pretence of being on the point of going out that she might go again very quickly. I could not risk her staying long for fear that Charles might return. And I scolded her soundly for calling without notice. I do not think she will make that mistake again.'

Darcy was sorry to think of the unfriendly treatment Miss Bennet must have endured. He wondered if he were doing the right thing. It grieved his sense of honour to be part of what was beginning to feel like deceit and connivance. But what was the alternative? Confess to Bingley that he knew that Miss Bennet was close by and he had hidden it from him? Would that not cause more grief to his friend? He decided he had done the right thing, even if the manner of it was displeasing to him.

WINTER PASSED, and it was time for Darcy to make his annual visit to Aunt Catherine. Georgiana was glad to be spared from sharing the visit, for Darcy pronounced the roads too wet and muddy for a lady to ride far on. He would go with their cousin John as he usually did.

It was a blustery afternoon in late March when Darcy and John turned their horses down the lane to Hunsford and trotted alongside the familiar palings of Rosings Park. They passed through the wrought iron gateway and up the gently sloping rise to the house.

The formal greetings were made, Oberon's sharp claws were avoided, and while refreshments were served, Lady Catherine proceeded to extract all the information she desired by turns from her nephews.

'It is a very good thing you have come,' said Lady Catherine. 'I see so few people of late; the roads are so excessively dreadful that no one has courage to make the journey.'

Darcy and John agreed that the roads were very bad, but they would not let a bit of mud keep them from their promised visit.

'I know too well that you would not refrain from visiting Rosings if it were in your power,' stated Lady Catherine. 'I know how excessively fond you are of this house. The Collinses' visitors managed the roads earlier this month,' she added. 'They were fortunate in travelling during a dry spell.'

'Collins?' repeated Darcy.

'The new parson. He has been here about nine or ten months now. He was married at the beginning of the year, to the daughter of a Sir William Lucas of Hertfordshire. Only an honorary knighthood, no real blood, and very little money, but she is a good sort of girl. I tell him he has chosen well. She has pretty manners enough to make a fourth at table, but she has

not been brought up too high to be above managing her house and poultry. You have met him, my parson; he has told me so.'

'Indeed,' said Darcy, remembering the tall, heavy young clergyman and his sermonising in the middle of supper at the Netherfield ball. 'I have also met a Sir William Lucas of Hertfordshire,' said Darcy. 'I think I recall the daughter, Miss Lucas. But I did not know of the marriage.' So the clergyman had not succeeded with Elizabeth Bennet after all. He was not surprised. The thought of her union with that man was too ridiculous. A rush of memories returned at the mention of Hertfordshire, none of which he welcomed. 'You are pleased with him, ma'am?'

'He does well enough. He is hopeless at cribbage, but he is a respectable young man and attentive to myself and to poor Anne.'

'I am glad to hear it,' said Darcy.

'Oberon does not like him,' added Lady Catherine, stroking the long, white fur of her companion. 'You gave him a nasty scratch, didn't you? Sir Lucas was here,' she continued. 'But he has returned to Hertfordshire. His younger daughter and a friend of Mrs. Collins remain behind. Perhaps you met them also when you were in the county? What are their names, Anne?'

Anne opened her mouth to speak, but her mother rushed on. 'Miss Maria, that is the name of the younger sister. She has not much to say for herself. But the other young lady, Miss Bennet, she has plenty to say for herself, does she not, Anne?'

Anne had not chance to reply a second time, for Darcy asked in a strange voice, 'Miss Bennet? Did you say Bennet?'

'Indeed. Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She is at the parsonage with Mrs. Collins.'

ADMIRATION TO LOVE

The parson of Hunsford called at Rosings after breakfast next day to pay his profuse respects to the nephews of his patroness. He took care to avoid Oberon, who hissed at his entrance.

Darcy had to rouse himself to reply to the parson's polite enquiries. He was tired, having endured a restless night, knowing that Elizabeth Bennet was but half a mile from him. He had been very diligent in putting all thoughts of her away since he'd last seen her four months ago, but something dormant had now awakened. He had a sudden desire to see her again, but he stifled it.

Then he argued with himself that seeing her in a new setting would likely put all his feelings into a correct context. He would be undeceived as to her captivating manners. She would not shine once she was away from the security of her own neighbourhood and was no longer among those she knew well. He would see her for what she was: a young woman, pleasant, but far below him in society, and he would be released from the folly of any attraction he had succumbed to last autumn. But he would not seek her out. If they should meet, then it would not be by his design. So how was it, he wondered, that he heard himself declaring to the parson that he would accompany him back to the parsonage and pay his respects to the ladies? He could not account for it. But he had said the words, and go he did.

John joined his cousin on the visit. Darcy paid his compliments to Mrs. Collins on her recent marriage. She received them graciously and invited them into her parlour. He felt his stomach make a ridiculous lurching sensation as he stepped into the room.

There she was. Elizabeth Bennet stood up and curtsied to him, but she said nothing.

‘How charmingly you have fitted up the old parsonage, Mrs. Collins,’ said John in his easy manner. ‘Old Bootes let it go quite shamefully towards the end. The garden was quite an eyesore when I last saw it, but how neat and trim it all looks as I passed through just now.’

‘You are very kind, Colonel. My husband is very active in the garden.’

‘So *very* kind,’ echoed Mr. Collins with a bow.

John glanced at his younger cousin; Darcy knew it was a prompt for him to say something.

‘You have indeed made great improvements to the house, madam,’ was all he could muster. Mrs. Collins thanked him graciously, and Mr. Collins thanked him profusely.

John and Mr. Collins provided all the talk for the next ten minutes, leaving Darcy free from the unpleasant necessity of it. He glanced frequently at Miss Bennet, but she did not speak to him. He wondered at her silence. Was she discomposed by his appearance? At length he exerted himself to say, ‘How is your family, Miss Bennet? I hope they are all well?’

‘I thank you. They are all well.’ There was a pause, and then she added, ‘My eldest sister has been in London these three months. Have you never happened to see her there?’

He felt momentarily confused. What could he say? If he admitted to knowing of it, then it would be clear that something had occurred to keep Bingley from likewise knowing. For the second time, he wondered if he had done wrong in concealing the knowledge from his friend. It vexed him to be put in the position of speaking with duplicity.

‘I have never been so fortunate as to meet Miss Bennet there,’ he answered evasively.

Elizabeth looked a little grave, but she said nothing more. Darcy was too unsettled to say anything further, and he stood up to indicate to John that it was time for them to end their visit.

‘AUNT CATHERINE,’ said John a few days later, ‘why don’t you ask your parson to dine with us?’

‘You desire his company, John?’ asked his aunt.

‘One can never have too much company,’ said John.

‘I think one can,’ argued Darcy. The thought of Elizabeth Bennet dining at Rosings alarmed him. It was both undesirable and yet desirable at the same time.

‘Even you cannot object when the company includes at least one very pretty young lady,’ John replied.

‘What are you saying, John?’ asked Lady Catherine, with a frown. ‘Why should Fitzwilliam be interested in young ladies?’ She glanced at her daughter.

‘I am merely being a tease,’ said John. ‘Truth be told, it is I who enjoy the company of a pretty woman at dinner.’

Lady Catherine looked at him down the bridge of her nose as though she were displeased. ‘Very well,’ she said finally. ‘We can have two tables of cribbage if the Collinses and their guests come. But I warn you, John: do not get any ideas about Miss Bennet. She may be quite pretty, but she has no fortune, and her family has lowly connections in trade. She is not for you.’

THE COLLINSES and their party arrived promptly for dinner. Miss Bennet greeted Darcy in the same restrained manner with which she had met him at the parsonage. Darcy had not dared to make any further calls upon her, but he knew that John had made several visits, and John now seated himself beside Elizabeth and proceeded to secure all her attention to himself. They certainly got on well. They conversed without pause, moving easily from one topic of interest to another. They talked of Hertfordshire, and then John entertained her with anecdotes of his many travels as a colonel in the king’s army. They talked of books and music. How was it that Miss Bennet could talk so freely and with obvious pleasure to his cousin but have barely a word to say to him?

Even Aunt Catherine’s notice was drawn to the couple, who were clearly having more enjoyment than anyone else in the room. ‘What is that you are saying, John? What is it you are talking of? What are you telling Miss Bennet? Let me hear what it is.’

‘We are speaking of music, madam,’ said he, when no longer able to avoid a reply.

‘Of music! Then pray, speak aloud. It is of all subjects my delight. I must have my share in the conversation if you are speaking of music. No

one enjoys music as I do. Had I ever learnt, I would have been a great proficient. And so would Anne, if her health had allowed her to apply. And how does Georgiana get on with her music?’

‘She gets on very well,’ replied Darcy. ‘She practises very constantly.’

Lady Catherine approved of this. One could not expect to excel if one did not practise constantly. She had often told Miss Bennet so and had told Miss Bennet that she was very welcome to come and practise on the instrument in the servants’ wing. She would be no trouble to anyone in that part of the house.

Darcy felt a pang of shame at his aunt’s words. For the first time it struck him that Miss Bennet was not the only person to have relatives who did not always behave as one would wish.

‘I have extracted a promise from Miss Bennet to play for me after supper,’ said John.

‘Very good,’ approved his aunt. ‘Any music is better than none at all.’

Elizabeth kept her promise and sat down at the piano. A tall window with curtains of mossy green velvet made a backdrop for her. The colour and texture complemented her rose-coloured gown and framed her charmingly, suggesting a garden setting for her youthful figure in rose satin. Oberon was prowling languidly around the piano.

‘Take care, Miss Bennet,’ John warned. ‘Oberon does not care for strangers.’ But Miss Bennet took no heed and leaned down to stroke the proud, white head.

‘But Oberon and I are already good friends, as you see.’ To Darcy’s astonishment, Oberon purred loudly in response. ‘I have always had a fondness for cats,’ said Miss Bennet, sitting up to arrange her music.

John moved his chair that he might sit nearer to her, but he was unable to get too close, for Oberon hissed him away. Darcy remained beside his aunt but could not subdue the ridiculous jealousy he felt on seeing John so engrossed with Miss Bennet. He even felt resentful of Oberon, who had stationed himself like a watchful sphinx beside Elizabeth’s stool as she played. Darcy soon found himself crossing the room to be nearer to her.

She looked up at his approach, gave him an arch smile, and said, ‘You mean to frighten me, Mr. Darcy, by coming in state to hear me? I will not be alarmed, though your sister does play so well.’

‘I shall not say you are mistaken,’ he replied, returning her wry smile, ‘because you could not really believe me to entertain any design of

alarming you. I have had the pleasure of your acquaintance long enough to know that you find great enjoyment in occasionally professing opinions that in fact are not your own.'

He had fallen into another round of verbal fencing with her, and he enjoyed it as much as ever. But it was dangerous. It drew him in. The flash of humour in her dark eyes, the way she smiled when she spoke—they were irresistible. John thought so too, judging by the admiring gaze he fixed upon her.

Elizabeth laughed heartily at this picture of herself and said to John, 'Your cousin will give you a pretty notion of me and teach you not to believe a word I say. I am particularly unlucky in meeting with a person so able to expose my real character. Indeed, Mr. Darcy, it is very ungenerous in you to mention all that you knew to my disadvantage in Hertfordshire—and, give me leave to say, very impolitic too—for it is provoking me to retaliate, and such things may come out as will shock your relations to hear.'

'I am not afraid of you,' Darcy replied.

'Pray let me hear what you have to accuse him of,' cried John. 'I should like to know how he behaves among strangers.'

'You shall hear then—but prepare yourself for something dreadful. I first met Mr. Darcy at a ball where he refused to dance beyond his own party, though gentlemen were scarce and ladies were in need of partners.'

'I had not at the time the honour of knowing any lady in the assembly beyond my own party,' Darcy replied, feeling a pang of discomfort as he recalled how he had spurned to dance with Elizabeth on that first meeting.

'True; and nobody can ever be introduced in a ballroom. Well, Colonel Fitzwilliam, what do I play next?'

'Perhaps,' said Darcy, 'I should have judged better had I sought for an introduction; but I am ill qualified to recommend myself to strangers.'

Elizabeth appealed to John as to why a man of sense and education should be ill qualified to recommend himself to strangers?

'I can answer your question,' said John. 'It is because he will not give himself the trouble.'

'I certainly have not the talent which some people possess,' said Darcy, 'of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation or appear interested in their concerns, as I often see done.'

‘My fingers,’ said Elizabeth, ‘do not move over this instrument in the masterly fashion which I see so many women’s do. But I have always supposed it to be my own fault—because I will not take the trouble of practising.’

Darcy smiled again and said, ‘You are perfectly right. You have employed your time much better. No one admitted the privilege of hearing you can think anything wanting. We neither of us perform to strangers.’

Lady Catherine’s voice rang out across the chamber. ‘What are you talking of?’ And she got up to find out for herself. She scooped up Oberon and remained at the instrument giving Miss Bennet advice and instruction on how she could improve her performance, recommending that she spend some time in London and hire a master to instruct her. She would improve very well if she had the advantage of a master. Elizabeth forbore all such discourse and obliged her audience by remaining at the instrument until it was almost time to leave.

A FORTNIGHT'S ACQUAINTANCE

Darcy spent another restless night. In the early hours of the morning, he left his sleepless bed, pulled back the curtains at the window, and looked down the gentle hill in the direction of Hunsford Parsonage. The moon was full, and the landscape was silvery with crisp shadows and glittering frost.

‘What is the matter with me?’ he murmured, leaning his head against the cold glass. ‘What madness is this?’

For a few moments, he considered enquiring next day as to the whereabouts of a local wisewoman and seeking from her some aid for his troubled soul. Never before had he felt so out of control of his own reasoning.

‘Am I obsessed? I cannot cease thinking of her. When will it pass?’

The moon looked down upon him with an indifferent eye, as though it had seen all such things before and would see them all again.

When he awoke next morning, the rational daylight urged him to action. He dressed, breakfasted, and walked to the parsonage—for what purpose he could not say, only that he felt compelled to see Elizabeth Bennet again. He must prove to himself, by the clear light of day, that she was merely a pleasing young woman and not the enchanting beauty, dressed in rose, that the candlelight and wine of the previous evening had conjured in his mind.

He was startled to find Miss Bennet alone, sitting at the small desk in Mrs. Collins’ parlour, writing a letter. Miss Bennet seemed equally startled to find herself alone with him. He sat down but felt the usual tongue-tied awkwardness.

‘I trust Lady Catherine is well this morning?’ she enquired. She rubbed distractedly at a spot of ink on her finger.

‘She is.’

‘And Miss Anne?’

‘Yes. She is well, thank you.’

‘And Colonel Fitzwilliam?’

‘He is well. My aunt has secured his attentions this morning.’

There was a silence.

‘How very suddenly you all quitted Netherfield last November, Mr. Darcy. It must have been a most agreeable surprise to Mr. Bingley to see his sisters after him so soon, for if I recollect right, he went but the day before. He and his sisters were well, I hope, when you left them?’

‘Perfectly so, I thank you.’

There was another pause.

‘I think I have understood that Mr. Bingley has not much idea of ever returning to Netherfield again?’

‘I have never heard him say so, but it is probable that he may spend very little of his time there in the future’

‘If he means to be little at Netherfield, it would be better for the neighbourhood that he should give up the place entirely, for then we might get a settled family there. But perhaps Mr. Bingley did not take the house so much for the convenience of the neighbourhood as for his own, and we must expect him to keep it or quit it on the same principle.’

‘I should not be surprised,’ said Darcy, ‘if he were to give it up as soon as any eligible purchaser offers.’

He thought she did not look pleased at his answer. She folded her hands tightly in her lap and said no more.

He looked about the parlour, floundering about in his mind for something to speak of. ‘This seems a very comfortable house,’ he said finally. ‘Lady Catherine, I believe, did a great deal to it when Mr. Collins first came to Hunsford.’

‘I believe she did—and I am sure she could not have bestowed her kindness on a more grateful subject.’

‘Mr. Collins appears to be very fortunate in his choice of a wife.’

‘Yes, indeed. His friends may well rejoice in his having met with one of the very few sensible women who would have accepted him, or have made him happy if they had.’ Her smile softened her acerbic words.

‘It must be very agreeable for her to be settled within so easy a distance from her own family and friends,’ he observed.

‘An easy distance, do you call it? It is nearly fifty miles.’

‘And what is fifty miles of good road? Little more than half a day’s journey. Yes, I call it a very easy distance.’

‘I should never have considered the distance as one of the advantages of the match,’ said Elizabeth. ‘I should never have said Mrs. Collins was settled *near* her family.’

‘It is proof of your own attachment to Hertfordshire. Anything beyond the very neighbourhood of Longbourn, I suppose, would appear far to you.’

She blushed and said, ‘I do not mean to say that a woman may not be settled *too* near her family.’

He wondered at the blush. He pulled his chair a little nearer to her and leaned forward to say eagerly, ‘You cannot have a right to such very strong local attachment.’

She gave him a look of surprise, and he felt uncomfortable at having said too much. He had been wondering aloud whether she would resist moving a great distance from her own family. He had been half wondering to himself whether she would consider moving to the north of the kingdom as mistress of Pemberley.

He quickly drew his chair back, wishing he had not voiced such words. He altered his tone to a cooler one and asked her if she were pleased with her visit.

She replied politely, and the conversation was ended by Mrs. Collins and her sister returning home. He left as quickly as he could without rudeness, feeling more restless and confused by his own feelings than he had when he arrived.

‘WHAT A CHARMING GIRL MISS BENNET IS,’ said John languidly. He was leaning back in his chair, having eaten his fill. He and Darcy were enjoying a quiet breakfast, for Lady Catherine had decided to have hers in bed that morning. ‘You have been calling at the parsonage as often as I have, so you must agree.’

Darcy said nothing in reply.

‘I wonder, Darcy, that you *do* keep calling, for you barely speak a word when you are there. Why is that? I have never known you to be afflicted with shyness before.’ John narrowed his eyes as he looked more keenly across the table at him. ‘If I did not know you better, I would accuse you of being in love with our pretty friend. It would explain the inexplicable circumstance of you prolonging our visit. Usually you cannot wait to be gone. I’ve never known you to stay two weeks before. Do you know, I fancy I might be half in love myself, Darcy. What do you say to that?’

Darcy glared at him.

‘What?’ laughed John. ‘You don’t approve?’ He gave an exaggerated sigh. ‘I daresay you’re right. It’s a wretched nuisance, being poor. I’d snap up that delightful creature in an instant if I could afford a penniless wife. She’s worth her weight in rubies, don’t you think? At first I thought her merely pretty, but each time I see her she seems to gain in beauty. It is quite remarkable. There’s something about her that’s positively bewitching. Those eyes, that delightful manner of talking, the way her mouth lifts into a smile, her laugh, her figure—but where are you rushing off to . . . ?’

DARCY VENTED his unwonted feelings in the only way he knew how: by a long, hard ride. But even that did not drive his turmoil entirely away.

He was too restless to sit for any length of time, and he declined sharing his aunt’s midday meal, preferring to stride out into the grounds to be alone with his thoughts. He countered his aunt’s protest against this neglect by insisting he absolutely *must* check the pollarding work for her, and see how the new ponds were faring.

He had circled the ponds several times, and was turning into the elm walk when he saw a solitary figure just ahead. He stopped short, debating whether or not he should turn round and walk away before Miss Bennet saw him. He told himself that he should do exactly that, but his feet had other ideas, and they hurried him forwards to catch up with her instead.

‘Mr. Darcy,’ she said in a voice half cool, half surprised.

He bowed in greeting. ‘Do I intrude, Miss Bennet? May I walk with you?’ He held out an arm. She hesitated momentarily before taking it, and they walked on together in silence.

‘I hope you have been enjoying the grounds of Rosings during your stay?’ he said after some minutes.

‘Very much. They are quite lovely. It has been a pleasure to see them alter throughout the season these past weeks.’

‘I do not need to ask if you are a keen walker, Miss Bennet; I recall your long walk across the fields to Netherfield last autumn.’

She laughed. ‘I do not venture so far nor so fast on my usual walks. That was a very particular occasion, and, if I recall, I excited some rather strange looks on my arrival.’

He could not deny this but replied gallantly, ‘Any surprise was soon superseded by admiration of your concern for your sister.’

He thought she stiffened at the mention of her sister, but he was not certain.

‘Do you ride, Miss Bennet?’

‘Not for pleasure. Only for necessity.’

‘But you walk for pleasure?’

‘Yes, indeed. A long, solitary walk is one of my chief pleasures. This part of the park has become a particular favourite of mine. I walk here after breakfast most days.’

They were silent for some time again, and not much more was said until they reached the gate in the palings that led to the parsonage. Darcy bowed, said goodbye, and watched her walk away up the path that wound through the parsonage lawn to the house.

‘WHAT ARE YOU THINKING OF, FITZWILLIAM?’ asked a small voice at Darcy’s shoulder. He was startled out of his thoughts. He turned to his cousin Anne. ‘You have not been listening to a word anyone has said all evening. Twice Mama asked you how you liked your salmon, and you did not answer.’

‘Did she? Did I?’

‘You must be thinking of something very important. What is it?’

He shook his head. ‘It is nothing. I shall exert myself. Inattentiveness to you and my aunt is unforgivable.’

Anne leaned forward and put her fan up to hide her lips from the watchful eye of her mother. ‘Is it *her*?’

He stared at her in reply.

‘I have seen how you look at her. She is very pretty. I wish I had half her boldness in her way of speaking with Mama. It is as though she is not frightened of anyone—fancy that!’ She leaned back again and observed him. ‘My dear cousin, I do not think I have ever seen you blush before. Well, I think she is very nice, even if she is only a middling performer at the piano. Mama will be furious, of course; she will likely never speak to you again, or not for a good long while. But I think it very romantic, and I never thought you the kind of man to fall in love.’

Darcy could only continue staring at Anne in astonishment. He wanted to say he had no clue as to whom she could be speaking of. He wanted to protest against every word and denounce her as foolish and imaginative in her thoughts.

But he could not.

TEMPTATION

When Darcy rose next morning, it was with the fixed determination that he would *not* walk out among the elms after breakfast. All through breakfast, he kept to his resolution. Nothing could entice him to walk out, even though Miss Bennet had let him know exactly where she was to be met with by way of an invitation to him to walk with her—yet he would not. That would be the action of a lover, and he was not in love. Yes, he was attracted to her. He could admit that much to himself, but it meant nothing. He was master of his own emotions and will.

And yet it happened again.

His feet took him where his head had told him he would not go, and he found himself striding across the dewy lawn towards the elm walk, scanning between the trees for a glimpse of a light figure in a dove-grey walking cloak.

There she was. The familiar surge of half gladness, half anxiety rushed through him.

He did not understand why she seemed so surprised to see him, but she returned his greeting with politeness, took his offered arm, and allowed him to walk with her a second time.

They walked in silence for some minutes until he opened the conversation. ‘Have you enjoyed your stay in Hunsford, Miss Bennet?’ he began.

‘I have, and far more than I expected to.’

He was pleased to hear this. It gave him encouragement.

‘Seeing your friend in her new situation has not engendered any feelings against the marriage state, I hope?’

She hesitated. ‘No. My friend seems most content. Her home is comfortable, and her new responsibilities in running her own household bring her great satisfaction.’

‘You would take pleasure in running your own home, do you think? The satisfaction from new responsibilities would compensate for having to move away from your family, perhaps?’

She paused again as though she knew not how to answer. He ran on. ‘You are pleased with Rosings?’

‘Yes, how could I not be pleased with Rosings?’

‘You would be pleased to know Rosings better? The house as well as the grounds?’

‘I . . . why, yes . . . ’

‘Good. That is good.’

They fell silent. It was further encouragement to hear she would be glad to return to Rosings. He was glad she made no strong objection to his aunt. They reached the palings of the parsonage and said farewell. She looked discomposed, but he felt a deal of apprehension himself. It was a serious business to be thinking of marriage, and how such thoughts had thrust themselves upon him in the course of a walk he could not say. Miss Bennet must be as acutely sensible of the fact as himself. She could not be unclear as to his meaning in his pointed questions.

Darcy kept walking after he had left Elizabeth. His pace was energised by the intensity of his thoughts. There was a great wrestling between his rational mind and his wayward feelings. On he marched, swiping at low branches, trampling over spring flowers without seeing them, and drenching the hem of his cloak as he strode through long, wet grass. He saw nothing around him; his mind’s eye was turned inward. When he found himself back at the door of the manor house, he had made up his mind—things were going too far. He could not in all seriousness propose a union with Miss Bennet—it was unthinkable. It was madness. Had he not rescued Bingley from allying himself with the same family? How much worse would it be for him to be related by the strongest ties to such a house? What horror and derision would it arouse among his relations and friends? It could not be. He must leave Rosings the very next day. He must flee from the temptation that his feelings were dragging him towards.

He entered the house to announce abruptly to John his intentions and to break the news to his aunt. Urgent business called him away. He must begin the return journey to Pemberley in the morning. Lady Catherine expressed her excessive disappointment, but he reminded her that he had stayed far longer than usual, and she of all persons must understand the duties of running an estate. He must return home. Georgiana would soon be returning after her winter in London, and he wished to have all things made ready for her and to be there to greet her.

Lady Catherine could not argue against such reasoning, but she immediately sent a servant to the parsonage to ask the Collinses and their guests to call that evening. It would be a farewell gathering.

THE COLLINSES ARRIVED with their usual punctuality. Mr. Collins gave his effervescent greetings; Mrs. Collins brought her more dignified attentions. Her younger sister looked as timid as ever, making her curtseys before scurrying away to sit in silence.

‘But where is your guest?’ asked Lady Catherine, looking behind them to see if Miss Bennet were somehow hidden from view. ‘Where is Miss Bennet?’

‘It is with the utmost regret, Lady Catherine,’ said Mr. Collins in a tone of utmost gravity to match his regret, ‘that I must inform you that Miss Elizabeth Bennet finds herself most painfully indisposed with a headache. She begs that I send you her sincere compliments and convey to you how disappointed she is to be deprived of the honour of waiting upon you this evening. She—’

‘How disagreeable!’ said Lady Catherine. Oberon narrowed his blue eyes and flicked his tail as though he too were annoyed.

‘Headaches are most disagreeable things indeed,’ agreed Mr. Collins.

‘We shall be one short at cards this evening. I had quite set my heart on a game this evening. And there is no one to play on the piano for us. *Most* disagreeable.’

Darcy told himself he was glad that Miss Bennet had not come that evening. It was a very good turn of circumstance indeed. Seeing her again might bring on another bout of his folly.

But despite his gladness at this turn of events, he felt his contrary feelings waxing stronger as the evening passed. By the time the card tables

had been set up, he could bear the pressure of his conflicted thoughts no more. He stood up so suddenly that everyone in the room was startled and turned in their chairs to look up at him.

‘I beg your pardon, ma’am,’ he said quickly to Lady Catherine, ‘but I feel it my duty to call upon Miss Bennet and assure myself of her being in recovery. I will walk across the park and call upon her.’

His aunt was too surprised to speak in the brief moment between Darcy’s words and his swift departure from the room.

‘Shall I walk over with you?’ he heard John call out behind him.

‘No, John,’ urged Lady Catherine. ‘I cannot lose you both; I must have one of you as my partner in the game.’

DARCY STOOD outside the door of the parsonage. He put his hand up to knock, then paused. He dropped his arm and turned away from the entrance porch. What was he thinking of? This was madness!

He did not walk away but looked up at the night sky as though searching for some guidance, some counsel from above. The moon was very full and very bright. He stared at it and at the glinting stars that swirled into shapes in the black sky. He suddenly felt very small and his life very insignificant. If his rank and wealth and status were as small things in the grand design of this world, then what did it matter whom he married? Was there not something more lasting than the brevity of his days to be sought and grasped hold of? Was not love the most important thing? Where had such thoughts come from?

He laughed back at the moon, for it was certainly smiling down on him with mirth. ‘Love is a madness,’ he told the stars, and they blinked their agreement.

But it is the only thing money cannot buy.

Yes. He agreed. He could buy anything he could ever want. But there inside the brick walls of the parsonage was something he could not purchase: the true affection of the woman he loved. And it was true—the moon was his witness—he loved her. He could deny it no longer.

But does she love you? the stars sang.

I don’t know. Perhaps not. But love would grow. She had been encouraging; she had accepted his attentions. She had as good as invited him to walk with her in the elm avenue. She might well be expecting his

proposal at any day, and there was no danger that she would not accept him. How could she not accept him? She had no security of her own. She needed his protection; she would be glad of the elevation of rank and fortune that he could offer her. He would offer her his heart, his hand, and his home—all that he had. It was a great condescension, for she was not his equal in standing, but he would be magnanimous. Some things were more important than wealth; he understood that clearly now as he stood under the influence of the ancient stars and planets shining down on him. He would do it. He would make her his wife before summer's end.

He put his hand out again, took hold of the doorknocker, and rapped decidedly.

PETULANCE & ACRIMONY

The servant opened the door and replied in answer to Darcy's enquiry that Miss Bennet was to be found in the parlour.

Darcy opened the parlour door. There she was, seated near the fire. Nervousness gripped him, and he spoke hurriedly as soon as he had stepped inside the room. 'I have come to ask how you are, Miss Bennet. I wished to hear that you were better.'

'I am a little better, sir,' she said, looking surprised by his entrance. She did not speak warmly, but he imputed this to her ill health.

He sat down opposite her and began turning his hat around in his hands. He stood up again. He walked across the room and turned back again. He did not know how to begin: words rushed through his mind, but they were flurried and jumbled—he could not think straight. He paced up and down, then, taking a deep breath, he plunged into speech.

'In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.'

He had said it.

He forced himself to look at her. She stared back at him. She flushed deeply, but she said nothing.

He took courage and continued.

'You must have been aware of my growing admiration, Miss Bennet. It began early in our acquaintance. I have tried to conquer such feelings, for we are not of equal standing—but I could not. I had determined that when I married I should choose a woman of close rank to myself, and it has been a

trial to me to find the gulf between us so great—but even such an unfortunate circumstance could not quell my growing attachment to you. The strength of my feelings has proved stronger than all the barriers between us. I have discarded the strengths of my own character, my reason, and my rationality, which tells me our alliance would be one of degradation on my part. I have cast aside all obstacles of your want of family connection and rank, and I have trampled on every rational inclination in order to win you. I have subdued my familial pride. I am ready to bear the disapproval and disappointment of my closest friends and relations. You have conquered all, Miss Bennet, and I beg you will now relieve me of my apprehension and anxiety by your acceptance of my offer of marriage.’

He felt emptied. He did not know if he had spoken well. Everything had tumbled out—all the months of confliction and struggle. He had bared his soul to her.

He did not know how long the time was between his speech ending and hers beginning. There was a silence, apart from the crackling of the fire and the sound of an owl from beyond the window. His heart was beating strongly as though he had run a great distance. He dared to look at her again. She was very still. She looked startled, and then her expression grew calmer. Then something like . . . anger . . . spread across her face.

‘In such cases as this,’ she began, her colour rising again, ‘it is, I believe, the established mode to express a sense of obligation for the sentiments avowed, however unequally they may be returned. It is natural that obligation should be felt, and if I could feel gratitude, I would now thank you. But I cannot.’

She paused, and he felt something uncertain and unexpected swirling towards him. He could not immediately grasp at her words—they were not what he expected. Why did she speak in such a voice? Why such cold anger?

‘I have never desired your good opinion, sir, and you have certainly bestowed it most unwillingly. I am sorry to have occasioned pain to anyone. It has been most unconsciously done, however, and I hope it will be of short duration. The feelings, which, you tell me, have long prevented the acknowledgement of your regard, can have little difficulty in overcoming it after this explanation.’

Darcy had to lean against the mantelpiece. He felt the blood drain from his face. He struggled to make sense of her words. She sat staring back at

him, looking as though she actually despised him!

He compelled himself to attain some degree of composure and in a tone of forced calmness said, 'And this is all the reply that I am to have the honour of expecting! I might perhaps wish to be informed why, with so little endeavour at civility, I am thus rejected.'

'I might as well enquire,' replied she, 'why with so evident a desire of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will, against your reason, and even against your character? Was not this some excuse for incivility, if I was uncivil? But I have other provocations. You know I have. Had not my feelings decided against you—had they been indifferent, or had they even been favourable—do you think that any consideration would tempt me to accept the man who has been the means of ruining, perhaps forever, the happiness of a most beloved sister?'

Darcy felt the colour rush back into his face. He stifled his desire to interrupt her. He listened with growing dismay.

'I have every reason in the world to think ill of you. No motive can excuse the unjust and ungenerous part you have acted there. You dare not, you cannot deny that you have been the principal if not the only means of dividing them from each other—of exposing one to the censure of the world for caprice and instability, and the other to its derision for disappointed hopes, and involving them both in misery of the acutest kind.'

She paused. And he was so incredulous at what he was hearing that all he could do was give a wry smile.

'Can you deny that you have done it?' she demanded.

'I have no wish to deny that I did everything in my power to separate my friend from your sister, or that I rejoice in my success. Towards him I have been kinder than towards myself.'

Her eyes flashed her displeasure at his words. 'But it is not merely this affair,' she continued, 'on which my dislike is founded. Long before it had taken place, my opinion of you was decided. Your character was unfolded in the recital, which I received many months ago, from Mr. Wickham. On this subject what can you have to say? Or under what misrepresentation can you here impose on others?'

This was a cruel blow. So she was in love with *him*!

'You take an eager interest in that gentleman's concerns,' he said bitterly.

‘Who that knows what his misfortunes have been can help feeling an interest in him?’ she cried.

‘His misfortunes!’ said Darcy contemptuously. ‘Yes, his misfortunes have been great indeed.’

‘And of your infliction!’ she cried with energy. ‘You have reduced him to his present state of comparative poverty. You have withheld the advantages that you must know to have been designed for him. You have deprived the best years of his life of that independence that was no less his due than his desert. You have done all this! And yet you can treat the mention of his misfortune with contempt and ridicule.’

‘And this,’ cried Darcy, walking with quick steps across the room, ‘is your opinion of me! This is the estimation in which you hold me! I thank you for explaining it so fully. My faults, according to this calculation, are heavy indeed! But perhaps,’ added he, stopping in his walk and turning towards her, ‘these offenses might have been overlooked, had not your pride been hurt by the honest confession of the scruples that had long prevented my forming any serious design. These bitter accusations might have been suppressed had I, with greater policy, concealed my struggles and flattered you. But disguise of every sort is my abhorrence. Nor am I ashamed of the feelings I related. They were natural and just. Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? To congratulate myself on the hope of relations whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?’

She glared at him, then looked away and replied in a clear if shaky voice, ‘You are mistaken, Mr. Darcy, if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me in any other way, than to spare the concern that I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner.’

He started back, feeling as though he had been struck.

‘You could not have made the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it.’

He could only stare at her; he was both mortified by and incredulous at what he was hearing. *Un-gentlemanlike manner*. The words resounded through him. But she had more blows to cast.

‘From the very beginning—from the first moment, I may almost say—of my acquaintance with you, your manners, impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the

feelings of others, were such as to form the groundwork on which succeeding events have built so immovable a dislike. I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed upon to marry.'

'You have said quite enough, madam,' he said, desiring to the utmost to silence her. Every word was a fresh blow of humiliation. 'I perfectly comprehend your feelings and have now only to be ashamed of what my own have been. Forgive me for having taken up so much of your time, and accept my best wishes for your health and happiness.' And with these words, he hastily left the room, marching past the servant who came to meet him, opening the front door himself, and quitting the house.

He walked about the grounds for some time. He did not trust himself to reappear before his aunt's keen eye in such a state of agitation. He walked almost blindly, following whatever path the moonlight showed him. At length he found himself standing back in front of the gate that led to the parsonage.

He stood looking across the parsonage garden at the house. He would have struggled to make its outline out, but the candle- and firelight of the parlour shone out as a square of gold through the uncovered window. Her words echoed through his head. He was angry. He was humiliated. He was utterly astonished. He had not expected such vehemence, such hostility—such utter rejection. He had never been spoken to in such manner before. No woman had ever rebuffed him in his life. He gripped the iron palings and hung his head. He lifted it again on hearing the approaching sound of voices. He turned to see a moving light coming from the direction of the path to the parsonage. His aunt's servant was leading the Collins party from the carriage to the door by lantern-light. He hurried away, glad to have avoided them.

A FAITHFUL NARRATIVE

‘Darcy! Where did you get to?’ John called out when Darcy reappeared in Lady Catherine’s candlelit drawing room.

Darcy shook his head as though to answer that he did not know.

‘Are you well, Fitzwilliam?’ asked his aunt. ‘You look pale. He looks pale; does he not, John?’

‘I am well,’ said Darcy brusquely. ‘I am tired, that is all. I will retire early. Excuse me.’ He bowed to his aunt and left the room.

Even when Darcy did finally fall asleep, he dreamed of Elizabeth. When he heard the houseboy creeping in to build up the fire a little after dawn, he got up, tugged on whatever clothes came to hand, and went down to his aunt’s morning chamber to make use of her writing desk. He stared at the blank sheet of paper he had spread before him, dipped his quill in the jar of ink, and finally began to write:

BE NOT ALARMED, Madam, on receiving this letter, by the apprehension of its containing any repetition of those sentiments or renewal of those offers, which were last night so disgusting to you.

I write without any intention of paining you, or humbling myself, by dwelling on wishes, which, for the happiness of both, cannot be too soon forgotten. The effort, which the formation and the perusal of this letter must occasion, should have been spared, had not my character required it to be read and written. You must, therefore, pardon the freedom with which I

demand your attention; your feelings, I know, will bestow it unwillingly, but I demand it of your justice.

HE WROTE ACKNOWLEDGING his part in separating Bingley from Jane Bennet. He would not renounce what he had done; he still believed he had acted in Bingley's best interests. In only one part of the matter did he doubt that he had done right, and that was in the fact of him having kept from Bingley the knowledge of Miss Bennet being in London. He had known of the fact from Caroline Bingley, and they had agreed together to keep it from her brother. He regretted this act of indirect deceit, but it was done.

He wrote that his actions in the separation of the couple were founded on the belief that it was only his friend who felt a strong attachment; he had observed Miss Bennet carefully and concluded that she was not likewise in love. If he was mistaken in this matter, then he begged pardon, but he could not repent of his actions, for there were other reasons for his interference that had moved him to act as he did. Namely, that the behaviour in public of Mrs. Bennet, the younger Bennet sisters, and even, on occasion, Mr. Bennet showed a total want of propriety. This was a far stronger reason for breaking up the attachment than the mere incongruity in fortune and rank between the couple. He was sorry to pain her and must give the utmost credit to herself and to her elder sister for not participating in their family's behaviour. Their own behaviour was to be the more greatly admired under such circumstances.

He wrote quickly, but when he had finished writing his account of his part in Bingley's affair, he put down the quill for some minutes and stared at the page. He did not see the words, but rather saw what he must next write. He must now address the charges laid against him regarding George Wickham. It was bitter even to have to think of him. Memories of Georgiana in tears on the day she confessed Wickham's attempt at an elopement came to his mind, and all the anger against George Wickham was revived. He had never told a soul of what had transpired, save John. He had vowed to himself that he never would tell another soul. It was too great a secret. Georgiana's name must never be tarnished by scandal.

Did he trust Miss Elizabeth Bennet with such a secret?

He did. He hardly knew how it was so, but trust her implicitly he did. And he wrote of it all: the providence of his father to George Wickham and

the subsequent squandering of the money given to him; Wickham's rejection of the living offered to him in preference for more money; his application for the living after he had misspent all of the money; Wickham's anger at Darcy when he denied him this. And finally, with a slower hand, he wrote the most difficult part of his letter, telling of the attempted elopement, pointing out that Georgiana was but fifteen years of age at the time. He signed his letter, blotted it, folded and sealed it, and leaned back against his chair, feeling utterly spent.

He made the strongest of efforts to be pleasant at breakfast. Lady Catherine seemed pleased at his low spirits. They were entirely in keeping with his unhappiness at having to leave Rosings. Entirely understandable.

DARCY PACED up and down in the elm grove, his letter clutched between his gloved fingers. The sun climbed and the shadows shifted, but still she did not come. He determined that he would have to deliver the letter to the parsonage, though he had great reluctance to do so: a gentleman passing a letter to a woman not his relative or wife amounted to a declaration of an engagement between them. It would attract much unwelcome attention. Just as he was giving up hope of seeing her, he caught sight of a figure standing beyond the grove at the gates that led into the park. He hurried forward. The figure was retreating, but he recognised the dove-grey cloak, and he called out to her.

She paused, then turned back to the gate just as he reached it. He held out his letter, and she took it instinctively.

'I have been walking in the grove for some time in the hope of meeting you,' he said. It took effort to maintain his composure, but he could see that hers was likewise troubled. 'Will you do me the honour of reading that letter?'

He did not wait for a reply but gave a slight bow and withdrew with long strides away from her. It was done. His sister's secret was entrusted to her. His honour and that of the person he held dearest were now in the hands of Miss Bennet.

He returned to the house, pausing first at the stables to ensure that all was made ready for his departure that day.

When he entered the house, he found Anne alone in the morning chamber. Anne beckoned him to her, and he sat down.

‘So?’ she said eagerly. ‘Pray tell me, how you have got on? Is there a secret engagement that I may congratulate you on? I promise I will not tell Mama; I am perfectly able to keep a secret.’

Darcy shook his head slowly. ‘No,’ he said in a hoarse voice. ‘No engagement, Anne. I have no secret to share with you.’

‘Oh, what a shame.’ She pouted, then sighed. ‘I suppose it is for the best. I would have had to listen to Mama lamenting the subject for months, nay, years, no doubt. But I would still have been glad for you. I have no hopes of marriage for myself; I know I have not the strength for it. Mine is the life of an invalid and not a wife. But you—I should like to see you happy and surrounded by your own family.’

Darcy felt he had never liked his cousin Anne so well as he did in that moment. He reached out and gently took her small, fragile hand in his own.

‘Oh, Fitzwilliam, there you are!’ cried Lady Catherine’s voice. She appeared in the doorway of the chamber and smiled her delight to see Anne and Darcy sat with clasped hands. ‘How excessively we will miss you, and you will miss us, I know. Your attachment to Rosings certainly increases with every visit.’ And she looked meaningfully between them.

Darcy was spared from a reply by John’s entrance with the declaration that it was time he and Darcy paid their farewell call at the parsonage. It would be rude not to take their leave of them all before they set off. Darcy wished he could think of an excuse that did not involve a half-truth, but he could not.

‘Relay a message to the Collinses,’ said their aunt. ‘Tell them they must dine here this evening, for I know I shall feel excessively dull. Miss Bennet must come and play for me.’

To Darcy’s relief and John’s disappointment, Miss Bennet was not at the parsonage when they called. Darcy said a few words of parting to Mrs. Collins, ignored the voluminous farewell greeting of Mr. Collins, asked that his compliments be given to Miss Bennet when she returned, and then hurried from the house, leaving John wondering at his hasty departure. John declared that he would wait for Miss Bennet to return, and wait he did for a good hour or more, but in vain, for the lady did not appear.

A MOST UNEXPECTED VISITOR

Spring passed into summer, and neither Darcy nor Bingley greatly improved from their low spirits.

‘I declare, I do not know what is the matter with you both!’ said Caroline on one particularly gloomy evening. ‘Mr. Darcy, you have not spoken one word to Louisa or myself since breakfast, and Charles—I never saw you so dull in all my life. What can be the meaning of it? What a way to treat your friends!’

‘Sorry, Caroline,’ said Bingley, exerting himself to smile but only managing half of one. ‘I am a dull fellow, and I know it.’ He sighed. ‘I wonder if a month or two in the country might be the thing. Perhaps I should go to Netherfield.’

‘To Netherfield?’ said Louisa, darting an anxious look between Caroline and Darcy. ‘My dear Charles, that will only make you more dull, not less! There will be nothing but haymaking and dusty roads in the country at this time of year. You had far better stay in town.’

‘Indeed,’ said Caroline. ‘What think you, Mr. Darcy?’

‘But there are friends to be met with in the country,’ said Bingley wistfully. ‘I never met with so many kind friends and neighbours as I did at Netherfield.’

Caroline and Louisa looked even more alarmed, and both gave pointed looks at Darcy as though to compel him to counteract such dangerous talk.

‘Come to Pemberley,’ said Darcy, rousing himself from his own apathy.

‘Oh, delightful idea!’ cried Caroline. ‘Oh, Charles, you cannot wish to be anywhere in the world for the summer months than at beautiful

Pemberley!’

‘What think you, Mr. Hurst?’ Louisa asked her husband, who was lounging nearby.

‘Think of what?’

‘Of going to Pemberley for the summer?’

‘Pemberley. Excellent wine cellar. Capital spot for fishing. Excellent idea.’

‘You can do me the honour of making a party with Georgiana and escorting her there,’ said Darcy. ‘That will give me liberty to travel up a day or two ahead to make all ready for you.’

‘That would be absolutely delightful, would it not, Charles?’ said Caroline. ‘Dear Georgiana, how I *long* to see her!’

Bingley gave another attempt at a smile and agreed that Pemberley would be the very place to spend the summer. To Pemberley, therefore, they were to go.

DARCY WAS glad to be riding back to Pemberley alone, excepting his manservant. At times he was glad to be in company so he could be distracted from his own thoughts, and other times he found company unbearable, for his thoughts pressed on him so deeply that it was hard to act as though all was well.

All was not well, and had not been since that particular evening at Hunsford Parsonage. He tried not to dwell on it, but again and again his thoughts circled back to that evening. He could not forget the look of disdain in Miss Bennet’s eyes. Her words haunted him: *your pride, your arrogance, your selfish disdain of the feelings of others—had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner—the last man in the world I could ever be prevailed upon to marry!*

‘I must get the better of this,’ he murmured to himself. ‘I will conquer this. I will forget her. I must.’

‘Did you speak, sir?’ called his groom.

Darcy did not reply, but he urged his horse on.

IT WAS USUALLY a great pleasure to reach Pemberley Lodge and ride through the gates into the park beyond. It usually gave him a feeling of homecoming. Under ordinary circumstances, he would feel a rush of pride at the beauty of his grounds that held so many pleasant memories.

He trotted along the path that was maintained to give easy passage through the stretch of woodland. Usually he would rein in his horse at the top of the gradual ascension that emerged out of the woods. From that vantage point, Pemberley House could be seen on the opposite side of the valley into which the road abruptly wound. Ordinarily, he would pause to admire its light stone walls, standing solid and sure and stately against the backdrop of the dark, wooded hills. Under normal circumstances, he would take pleasure in seeing the stream running in front of the house, and memories of childhood paddling and fishing would welcome him home. When he had drunk his fill of the beautiful view, he would turn his horse to the gentle descent down the hill into the valley. He would cross the bridge, then ride up past the house to the stables where his groom would attend to his horse.

That was the usual manner of Darcy's arrival at Pemberley. But that afternoon, for the first time in his life, he barely noticed anything. It vexed him, and he longed to be able to fix his mind on all the usual things, but he could not. He felt a heaviness, a kind of sickness, an apathy, a dull grief. He could not fathom it. Only once before had he known such heaviness of soul, and that was upon the death of his mother.

He reached the stables. The groom who hurried forward to take his horse welcomed him home.

'Whose carriage is that?' Darcy asked, seeing what looked like a hired carriage from Lambton.

'Party of gentlefolk asking to see the house, sir. Mrs. Reynolds agreed to show 'em round, thinking you weren't to be arriving before the morrow, sir.'

Darcy left the road from the stables and turned towards the house entrance. He could see a small group of people stood with their backs to him, facing the house. Woodson, the head gardener, was telling them the house had been built in the time of the present master's great-great-grandfather, when King Harry had been upon the throne. Woodson turned at the sound of Darcy's approach, looked a little surprised to see his master, raised his cap, and bowed.

‘Woodson,’ said Darcy, nodding to him in greeting. The first figure of the party turned round, and a pair of dark eyes met his own and locked with his in a stare of astonishment.

Darcy felt his face flush with the abruptness of the meeting. Miss Elizabeth Bennet flushed scarlet at precisely the same time.

He started and then froze, unable for a moment to move one step. She had given a little gasp and turned away. He recovered himself and walked forward to meet the party. Elizabeth turned round again, still flushed and more discomposed than he had ever seen her before. For the past four months, he had carried an image of her in his mind: a painful image of her looking at him with total disdain. That was the last expression he had seen on her face, and it had haunted him. But that look was gone. There was no coldness, no contempt. She looked suddenly vulnerable, even childlike in her confusion.

‘Miss Bennet,’ he began hesitantly. ‘An unexpected pleasure to see you. I hope you are well?’

She could barely look at him. ‘Oh, I thank you, yes, I am well.’

‘And your family, I hope they are all well?’

‘Yes, thank you, they are all quite well.’ She spoke breathlessly.

‘How long have you been in this country? Do you stay long? Did you leave Longbourn very long ago?’ He knew he was rambling, but she seemed not to notice.

‘Oh, we are here for a day or two more, and then we continue travelling. We are on a tour of pleasure, you see.’

They both fell silent, and he could not think of anything further to ask her. They stood uncomfortably for some moments without saying a word until he suddenly recollected himself and politely took leave of her.

Darcy hurried through the entrance hall, barely acknowledging Mrs. Reynolds who met him there.

‘Oh, Mr. Darcy, we did not expect you till the morrow,’ she called after him as he marched towards the staircase and bounded up the stairs two steps at a time.

He wanted only to change out of his dusty travelling clothes as quickly as possible and make himself clean and presentable. He wasted no time in waiting for his valet but hurried to wash and dress himself with hands that threatened to shake. He had to go back down and see Miss Bennet before she left the grounds. Something in her look and her manner had given him

the tiniest glimmer of hope. He felt that she did not now despise him as she had done. Perhaps his letter had removed such dislike. He was determined that he would show her that he was capable of behaving towards her in a most gentlemanlike manner. If she would let him.

AFFABILITY & CONDESCENSION

Darcy walked with long strides down the sweeping lawn, over the bridge, and towards the river. Woodson generally took guests along the river walk, and Darcy hoped today would be no exception. It would be a bitter disappointment not to speak with Miss Bennet before she left—surely it was a propitious twist of fate that had brought her here and brought him a full day earlier than he had planned. They must be meant to meet—he could almost believe some benevolent power was at work to bring them so very unexpectedly together. Perhaps he had been given a second chance. He walked faster.

He glimpsed a group of figures up ahead. They were walking along the riverside path in the direction of the house. His own path took him out of view as it wound through a screen of leafy trees, but he soon saw them again. Elizabeth was pushing a low-hanging branch out of her way, and her gaze was directly on him, for she had seen him first.

He gave a polite, slight bow of greeting. Miss Bennet looked almost as discomposed as she had earlier, but she soon rallied, though her voice was not quite steady. She spoke of the beauty of the place, how charmingly the house was situated, how delightful the riverside was, and then she changed colour and fell silent.

Only then did Darcy notice the figures of an older lady and gentleman, stood a little way behind Elizabeth, who were looking on with curiosity. ‘Would you do me the honour of introducing me to your friends, Miss Bennet?’ he asked.

She looked a little surprised, then a little pleased, and he thought he could detect the beginnings of a smile about her mouth. But she suppressed it, turned to her companions, and made the introduction. 'May I present to you my aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner?' Curtseys and bows were exchanged.

'I will walk Miss Bennet and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner back to the house, Woodson,' said Darcy.

'Very good, sir,' said his head gardener, leaving the party to resume his duties.

'Do you care for fishing, Mr. Gardiner?' Darcy asked, seeing that Mr. Gardiner was very interested in watching the river.

'Very much! Though I don't often get the chance, living in the city as I do.'

Elizabeth and her aunt walked on arm-in-arm, and Darcy fell into step behind them with Mr. Gardiner. He was sure from the tilt of Elizabeth's head that she was listening to him. 'You must come and fish here as often as you like while you are in the neighbourhood. I can show you the best parts of the stream for trout. During my childhood, I spent as many of my free hours fishing here as I could, but I likewise find I am too much in town these days for as much sport as I should wish.'

The party wended their way along the riverbank. Darcy pointed out some unusual plants, and they stopped to examine them. Mrs. Gardiner then took her husband's arm, claiming she was feeling a little tired, and Darcy fell into step beside Elizabeth.

There was the familiar awkward silence between them, but Elizabeth broke it first, speaking quickly.

'I must tell you, Mr. Darcy, that we had been assured of your not being at home, or we should never have intruded. Your arrival, I gather, was unexpected.'

'It was. I came a day early to deal with business before a party of guests arrives early tomorrow. Among the guests,' he added, 'are some who will claim an acquaintance with you—Mr. Bingley and his sisters.'

Elizabeth inclined her head in acknowledgement but said nothing. Darcy wondered if the mention of Bingley had aroused an unhappy remembrance in connection with her sister. He did not know how to breach this moment of discomfort, but he gathered his courage to ask of her

something of importance—something that would speak clearly to her of his desire in securing her goodwill towards him.

‘There is also one other person in the party,’ he said, ‘who more particularly wishes to be known to you. Will you allow me, or do I ask too much, to introduce my sister to your acquaintance during your stay?’

‘Oh,’ she said, clearly surprised by such an attention. ‘I . . . thank you. I would be very pleased . . .’ She trailed off, but he was satisfied. She understood the significance of the request, and she had not rejected it.

For the first time that day, he noticed the beauty of his surroundings as they strolled along the gentle river. It was as if the sun had only just appeared from behind a thick, black cloud, when in reality it had been shining on him all that day.

They said little more as they walked, but enough had been said for both of them to gain a tentative, unspoken understanding. They reached the house, and Darcy invited her to go in and rest a while. She declined, saying she was not at all tired, so they stood together on the lawn awaiting Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, who walked at a slower pace.

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner politely refused their host’s offer of refreshment. They felt they had taken up enough of his time; they would return to their lodgings in the neighbouring village of Lambton. With much civility on both sides, they made their farewells and left. Darcy watched them drive away, then turned and walked slowly, deep in thought, back to the house to give a very different greeting to Mrs. Reynolds than the one he had given her an hour earlier.

‘MISS ELIZA BENNET!’ cried Caroline. ‘How is it *she* is come to Pemberley?’ She sat down on the nearest chair very suddenly as though she had received a blow.

‘She is travelling in the country with her relations,’ said Darcy.

‘And she just *happened* to meet with you, I suppose,’ said Caroline. ‘What arts. What . . .’

She did not continue, for Darcy fixed a forbidding look upon her. He would not suffer Caroline’s sharp speeches in front of Georgiana.

‘How delightful,’ said Bingley, ‘I do so love to meet old friends. I shall certainly call upon her.’

His sisters gave him a disdainful look but dared not reply.

‘I should like to introduce you to Miss Bennet,’ Darcy said, turning to Georgiana.

Georgiana flushed a little; she was always anxious at meeting new people. But she replied, ‘I should like to meet her very much.’

‘Let us go at once!’ cried Bingley.

‘Charles!’ protested Louisa. ‘We have only just arrived.’

‘You go, Bingley,’ said Darcy. ‘I would not wish to hurry Georgiana out so soon after her long journey.’

‘Oh, I am not fatigued in the least,’ said Georgiana. ‘I would be happy to go now.’

Darcy smiled his pleasure, and the three set out to call on Miss Bennet at the inn in Lambton.

Darcy watched the meeting between Elizabeth and his sister with great interest. Georgiana was a little taller and larger in figure than Elizabeth’s light frame, and Georgiana was painfully shy, but Elizabeth appeared to understand this instantly and spoke very kindly to her, just as though she were speaking to a younger sister.

‘Miss Bennet—how delighted I am to see you again!’ cried Bingley, coming into the room a few minutes later, having been detained in seeing about the horses. ‘It has been a very long time since I had the pleasure of seeing you; it is above eight months. We have not met since we were all dancing together at Netherfield.’

‘So it is; I have not forgotten either, Mr. Bingley.’

‘Are all your sisters at Longbourn, Miss Bennet?’

‘They are.’

Darcy felt a twinge of anxiety in case Elizabeth should mention the fact of her sister having been in London for three of those eight months, but she must have discerned that it would be an awkward subject and was gracious enough to say nothing of it.

The visit concluded with Darcy reminding Mr. Gardiner of their arrangement to fish together next morning and inviting Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner and Miss Bennet to dine at Pemberley the evening after next, to which they accepted. There were smiles all round as they took their leave: a

shy smile from Georgiana, an open one from Bingley, and thoughtful ones from Elizabeth and Darcy.

A SCHEME OF INFAMY

‘I declare, Darcy, I cannot see what it is about this fishing business that pleases you so well,’ said Bingley, looking dolefully at his empty line. ‘We’ve been here more than an hour, and I’ve not caught a thing.’

‘The art of fishing includes the art of patience,’ replied his friend.

‘And that is something I lack, as well you know.’ He threw down his line and looked about for some other diversion. ‘I will take a walk in the woods over there,’ he decided. ‘One of your grooms told me there used to be a wisewoman in them. Shall I be quite safe, do you think? If some of the fairfolk are about, I may be in danger of falling under some enchantment.’

‘There’s no such person,’ said Darcy. ‘There was an old woman in these parts with some very minor sort of magic, but that was nigh on twenty years ago.’

‘Pity,’ said Bingley, ‘I could do with some otherworldly help.’ Without explaining what kind of help it was he wished for, he ambled off.

‘You have more patience than my friend,’ Darcy said to Mr. Gardiner. ‘You do not look heartily bored as yet.’

‘I could spend all day beside a river,’ said Mr. Gardiner.

‘Shall Mrs. Gardiner join you here in the course of the day?’ asked Darcy, feeling some hope of seeing Elizabeth.

‘Mrs. Gardiner is likely at your house by this time, sir. She had set her heart on calling upon Miss Darcy, to return her kindness in calling on us yesterday morning.’

‘And does Miss Bennet accompany her?’

‘She does.’

‘Then you will not think me remiss if I leave you in Mr. Hurst’s company for a half-hour while I pay my respects to the ladies.’

Mr. Gardiner waved him on cheerfully.

DARCY WALKED QUICKLY UP to the house. He wondered at himself to think how happy the prospect of a glimpse of and a few words with Elizabeth made him. He hardly recognised himself. But he would neither quell nor resist his feelings any more: he had made up his mind on that score. His heart belonged to Elizabeth Bennet; she alone should be mistress of Pemberley, regardless of the consequences.

He was gratified by Elizabeth’s look of pleasure as he entered the room that Georgiana called the rose chamber, on account of the pattern on the wall hangings. The ladies of the house were assembled around a table of refreshments. He greeted them all and took the seat beside Georgiana, knowing she would be in need of courage in her role of hostess. He was right, for she gave him a grateful look as he began directing the conversation between herself and Miss Bennet, who sat opposite.

There was a pause in the conversation, and Caroline took advantage of it to say in a loud voice, ‘Pray, Miss Eliza, are not the officers of the duke’s regiment removed from your county? They must be a great loss to your family, especially Mr. Wickham, for I recall he was a great favourite with you.’

Darcy felt Georgiana tense and saw her drop the grape she had been about to eat. She gave him a darting glance of misery. Miss Bennet also showed a moment of distress but was able to answer in a detached tone that on the contrary, her family was enjoying the return to their quiet country ways now that the disruption of the regiment had moved on. Caroline looked vexed, and he saw her sneer as she turned away. Georgiana hung her head and could not say another word, and Miss Bennet and her aunt soon concluded their visit.

‘How very ill Miss Eliza Bennet looked this morning, Mr. Darcy,’ said Caroline when the guests had left. ‘I never in my life saw anyone so much altered as she is since the winter. She is grown so brown and coarse! Louisa and I were agreeing that we should not have known her again.’

‘I see no alteration other than her being a little tanned, no miraculous consequence of travelling in the summer,’ said Darcy coolly.

‘For my own part,’ Caroline rejoined, ‘I must confess that I never could see any beauty in her. Her face is too thin, her complexion has no brilliancy, and her features are not at all handsome. Her nose wants character—there is nothing marked in its lines. Her teeth are tolerable, but not out of the common way; and as for her eyes, which have sometimes been called so fine, I could never see anything extraordinary in them. They have a sharp, shrewish look, which I do not like at all, and in her altogether there is a self-sufficiency without fashion, which is intolerable.’

Darcy was provoked but refused to speak, deeming Caroline’s jealous tirade not worth attending to. Caroline seemed more vexed by his silence, clearly desiring to goad him into a reply.

‘I remember when we first knew her in Hertfordshire, how amazed we all were to find she was a reputed beauty. I particularly recollect you saying one night, after they had been dining at Netherfield, “She, a beauty! I should as soon call her mother a wit.” But afterwards she seemed to improve on you, and I believe you thought her rather pretty at one time.’

‘Yes,’ replied Darcy, who could contain himself no longer, ‘my initial impression has greatly changed. For many months since first meeting her, I have considered her as one of the handsomest woman of my acquaintance.’

He then went away, leaving Caroline to all the satisfaction of having forced him to say what gave no one but herself any pain.

‘THERE WILL BE three additional guests at dinner tonight,’ Darcy told Mrs. Reynolds.

‘Very good, sir. I will inform the cooks.’

‘Inform them that they are particular friends of mine,’ said Darcy. ‘I should like the dinner to be a very good one.’

‘Yes, sir. I shall ensure that everything is just as it ought to be. Was there anything else, sir?’ asked Mrs. Reynolds, when her master did not move away.

‘No, that is . . . do you know, Mrs. Reynolds, if there are any especial attentions that ought to be made to a lady that I have not thought of?’

‘Particular attentions, sir? In what respect?’

‘Oh, I do not know—do they like nosegays, or scent, or any special delicacies at table?’

‘Is the lady in question of any greater import than your other female guests, sir?’ asked Mrs. Reynolds, looking intrigued.

‘No. Yes. I am sure you are right, Mrs. Reynolds. Do as you see fit; I trust to your judgement as always.’

He left his wondering housekeeper and went to sit with his sister for a half-hour before his morning ride. Georgiana was sorting through her sheets of music.

‘I wanted to find some nice pieces to play for Miss Bennet this evening,’ said Georgiana.

‘I was going to suggest the very same thing,’ said Darcy, pleased with this attention.

‘I thought Miss Bingley might not wish to play tonight, for she seems to be in a dreadfully bad temper since she arrived, and so I thought to be prepared, even though it is quite terrifying to play before so many people at once.’

‘I am more proud of your courage than I am of your excellent playing, Georgiana.’

Georgiana flushed with pleasure.

‘I am glad you like her,’ he said.

‘I like her very much. She speaks very kindly to me, and she makes me laugh. And she has no fear of Miss Bingley, though Miss Bingley is so very fierce with her.’

Darcy smiled. ‘No, she has no fear of anyone, and yet she is the kindest spirit in the world to those she loves.’

‘Did you confirm with Miss Bennet and her aunt and uncle what time to come this evening?’ asked Georgiana. ‘I know the hour of dining varies a good deal among people; so Mrs. Annesley tells me.’

Darcy was pleased to admit that a time had not been fixed on. His pleasure was derived from the necessity this gave him of riding over to Lambton to give such a message to Miss Bennet.

A STABLE HAND hurried to take Darcy’s horse when he dismounted in the courtyard of the inn at Lambton. Darcy walked past the mullioned windows of the inn and into the half-timbered building. The host assured his eminent

visitor that Miss Bennet was indeed in her rooms, and a young manservant was sent to lead the way to her.

It was curious, Darcy thought, as he removed his hat and waited for the servant to open the door, curious that he should feel such peculiar feelings at the mere anticipation of meeting those dark, smiling eyes. The servant stepped aside, and Darcy was now facing those very eyes. But they were not smiling. He started at the sight of her, for Elizabeth's eyes were wild and full of tears.

'I beg your pardon,' she cried, 'but I must leave you. I must find Mr. Gardiner this moment on business that cannot be delayed. I have not an instant to lose!'

She was white and trembling. 'Good heavens! What is the matter?' he cried, with more feeling than politeness. Then recollecting himself, he said, 'I will not detain you a minute, but let me or let the servant go after Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. You are not well enough; you cannot go yourself.'

She hesitated but then heeded him with a nod of agreement. He called back the servant, and she commissioned him, though in so breathless an accent as made her almost unintelligible, to fetch his master and mistress home instantly.

When the servant had gone, she sank down into a chair. Darcy was appalled at her distress. He had a sudden desire to gather her to him and hold her until her tears and trembling subsided, but he could only say in a tone of gentleness and commiseration, 'Let me call your maid. Is there nothing you could take to give you present relief? A glass of wine—shall I get you one? You are very ill.'

'No, I thank you. There is nothing the matter with me. I am quite well; I am only distressed by some dreadful news which I have just received from Longbourn.' She burst into fresh tears and for a few minutes could not speak another word. Darcy, in wretched suspense, could only tell her again how concerned he was and how he wished he could help her.

At length, she spoke again. 'I have just had a letter from Jane with such *dreadful* news. It cannot be concealed from anyone. My younger sister has left all her friends—has eloped—has thrown herself into the power of—of Mr. Wickham. They are gone off together. You know him too well to doubt the rest. She has no money, no connections, nothing that can tempt him. She is lost forever!'

Darcy was fixed in astonishment.

‘When I consider,’ she added in a yet more agitated voice, ‘that I might have prevented it! I, who knew what he was. Had I but explained some part of it only—some part of what I learnt—to my own family! Had his character been known, this could not have happened. But it is all, all too late now.’

‘I am grieved indeed,’ said Darcy, feeling that his words did not carry the weight of just how appalled he was. ‘I am shocked—but is it certain—absolutely certain?’

‘Oh, yes! They left together on Sunday night and were traced almost to London, but not beyond.’

‘And what has been done, what has been attempted to recover her?’

‘My father has gone to London, and Jane has written to beg my uncle’s immediate assistance. We shall be off, I hope, in half an hour. But nothing can be done—I know very well that nothing can be done. How is such a man to be worked on? How are they even to be discovered? I have not the smallest hope. It is every way horrible!’

Darcy shook his head in silent acquiescence.

‘When my eyes were opened to his real character—oh, had I known what I ought, what I dared to do! But I knew not—I was afraid of doing too much. Wretched, wretched mistake!’

Darcy made no answer. The same thoughts were running through his own mind. Had he not kept Wickham’s attempted elopement with Georgiana so secret, nor covered over the probability of Wickham’s abandoned child, now growing up among the head shepherd’s family, had he exposed Wickham’s transgressions against these young women to the world, Wickham would have been prevented from inveigling himself into the trust of other families and their young women. These thoughts were heavy and painful, and he paced up and down the oaken boards of the floor as they chased through his mind.

Miss Bennet was still sobbing pitifully, and, feeling frustration at his inability to comfort her, he said gently, ‘I am afraid you have been long desiring my absence, nor have I anything to plead in excuse of my stay but real though unavailing concern. Would to Heaven that anything could be either said or done on my part that might offer consolation to such distress! But I will not torment you with vain wishes. This unfortunate affair will, I fear, prevent my sister having the pleasure of seeing you at Pemberley.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Elizabeth, blotting her eyes with her handkerchief. ‘Be so kind as to apologise for us to Miss Darcy. Say that urgent business calls us home immediately. Conceal the unhappy truth as long as it is possible; I know it cannot be long.’

‘You have my word regarding the secrecy of this matter,’ he assured her. ‘I am so heartily sorry for your distress. I hope there will be a happier conclusion to this than we can at present hope for. Please give my compliments to Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner.’ He moved to the door, giving her one last parting look before he left.

TRICKS & STRATAGEMS

‘**W**hat’s the matter with the master?’ Hodson whispered to Mrs. Reynolds as he passed her in the servant’s hall.

‘No one knows,’ whispered back the housekeeper. ‘But I reckon it’s something to do with the young lady who was to dine tonight, for she’s not coming. Master told Miss Darcy that the lady had to rush back home.’

‘Do you think she’s rushed away from him?’

‘ ’Tis hardly likely. Why should any young lady rush away from the master? But whatever it is, it’s upset him mightily. Turner says the master’s pacing up and down like a madman with such a look upon his face as would frighten the crows from the fruit trees.’

Their conversation was ended by the approach of a pair of footmen, and they parted to go about their duties.

DARCY PACED up and down in his chambers. He had not removed his heavy riding boots, and they stomped furiously on the floor. ‘If I could find them,’ he muttered. ‘Make that scoundrel, that ingrate, that impudent villain marry her to spare the family being plunged into shame—but he could be anywhere!’ He stopped pacing as though a thought had suddenly struck him. His valet had quietly opened the door to see if his master was ready to change out of his riding clothes yet, but Darcy did not see him as he rushed past him, out of the door, and down the hallway to the east wing.

He flung open the door to his old nursery, crossed the room in a few long steps, and strode into his old childhood bedchamber. Everything was

just as it had been in his youth: the narrow bed that he had long outgrown, the old familiar trinkets and furniture. His eyes fell on the oak chest that stood in one corner. It had seemed a large chest to him as a child, but now it looked small. He had little trouble in dragging it from its corner. There was a small billow of dust released as it was moved, and there among the dust lay something small and silvery. He snatched it up and blew the dust from it. The little disc sat in the palm of his hand, and a rush of memories came back at the sight of the wish.

‘I wish,’ he said, speaking from desperation rather than from hope, ‘I knew where George Wickham is to be found.’

Nothing happened.

He closed his fist over the wish with a groan. He felt something shift in his hand; he opened his fingers, and the wish was gone. ‘But—’ he protested. Before the words, ‘But where is he?’ could leave his lips, a vivid picture filled his mind.

It was as though he stood upon on a rooftop in a city, looking down on the street below, just as a bird might do. There was a row of terraced houses crammed together. He did not recognise the street, but it turned off a main road, on the corner of which was an inn. The inn’s painted board swung a little in the wind, bearing a picture of a two-headed swan.

A young woman held down her hat as she was hurried along the street by a tall, handsome young man with dark chestnut waves beneath his hat brim. The couple stopped before a house with a doorknocker shaped as a bull’s head. The man knocked hard; a servant girl opened it, then disappeared. An older woman came to the door wearing a white linen cap and a dark grey gown. The man stepped towards her, and the scene faded. Darcy was standing back in his childhood bedchamber, blinking hard as his eyes readjusted to his surroundings.

‘Mrs. Younge,’ said Darcy through gritted teeth, having recognised the woman in the linen cap and grey gown.

He rushed from the room. ‘My horse!’ he shouted to the first servant he saw. ‘I want my horse again directly!’

There was not a moment to lose. The house of Mrs. Younge was his urgent destination. Whatever it took, he would not let Wickham leave the Bennet girl as he had left so many before her. Not this time. May Heaven preserve them from a duel—for at that moment in time, nothing would please him more!

IT TOOK three days to travel to London to seek out the inn by the name of The Two-Headed Swan. It was mid-afternoon on the fourth day when Darcy rode down the street leading away from the inn, looking hard at the doors of the houses until he found one with a door knocker in the shape of a bull's head. He gave his horse to his attendant and rapped forcefully on the door.

A young girl in a servant's apron answered.

'Is your mistress home?' he asked.

'She ain't got no more rooms for let, sir,' said the girl. 'We're all filled up.' She was closing the door again, but Darcy put his hand out, pushed the door open, and stepped inside. The girl gave a little cry of surprise.

'Where is she?' he asked, walking down a dark hall and looking into the rooms that led from it.

'Polly, who is there?' came a woman's voice. There was a rustle of skirts, and quick footsteps, and Mrs. Younge appeared. 'You!' she cried. 'What are—?'

'Where is he?' demanded Darcy.

'Who?'

'Do not trifle with me, Mrs. Younge. I am in no good humour.'

'Polly, get on with your work,' said Mrs. Younge to her wide-eyed servant girl. 'Follow me,' she said coldly to Darcy, turning away.

He followed her into a parlour, and she shut the door. 'What are you doing here?' she asked, turning round to face him.

'Where is Wickham?'

'Mr. Wickham? Why, I have not set eyes on him—'

'Is he in the house at this moment?'

'He is not, nor ever has been in this house—'

'He was here. He was seen at your door—do not lie to me, or I vow matters will take an ugly turn. I will brook no resistance. For the last time, Mrs. Younge, *where is he?*'

Mrs. Younge lifted her head in a stubborn stance. 'You are not master here, Mr. Darcy. You cannot *make* me tell you anything. I have done nothing wrong that you can threaten me so.'

'You are harbouring a man who is likely fled from a multitude of debts. And that is only the least of his crimes.'

'I know nothing of his debts. It is nothing to me.'

‘I shall return with his creditors, Mrs. Younge. They will gain legal authorisation to search your house.’ It was a bluff, but he must try every means until he found the one that worked upon her.

‘I’m not having creditors swarming through my house—I run a respectable lodging house!’

‘Then take me to him and no one else will enter!’

She glared at him. Her arms were tightly crossed across her chest. ‘He’s not here,’ she said firmly. ‘And that’s the truth of it.’

‘But he is staying here? Is the young lady who came with him here?’

‘Neither of them are here.’

Darcy made as though to go. ‘Then I will quickly return with his creditors to search for him, for I know for certain that he was seen at this house.’

‘I tell you, he’s not here,’ she cried. ‘He was here—he asked me to give him a room, but I could not, for I had no rooms left. He went elsewhere, and that’s the truth of the matter—upon my life, it is!’

Darcy examined her face. She was agitated and she was angry, but he thought she perhaps did speak truth. ‘Did you direct him to another address?’

She clenched her mouth into a tight line and looked away.

Darcy took a deep breath. He must try a different tack, though it galled him to do so.

‘There would be financial reward for knowledge of his whereabouts.’

Her eyes moved back to him. She seemed to be thinking. ‘How much?’

‘Ten pounds.’

‘Twenty.’

He gave a wry smile. ‘If you can direct me to him, then twenty it shall be.’

She unfolded her arms and moved to the door, opened it, and called out, ‘Polly!’ Light footsteps were heard skittering down the hallway. ‘Fetch me my cloak and walking shoes, and tell Grubb he’s to accompany me on business.’

She closed the door again and turned back to Darcy. ‘I don’t rightly know where he went, but if you’ll return tomorrow morning, I may have an address for you.’

‘I will return this evening, Mrs. Younge.’

‘Just as you please. Don’t forget the twenty pounds.’

THE IMPUDENCE OF AN IMPUDENT MAN

Darcy returned at sunset, leaving his groom sitting in Mrs. Younge's parlour holding the bag of gold coin. If the address he was directed to was correct and Wickham was found, the money would be hers upon his return. If he were sent on a false errand, then he would reclaim both his groom and his gold.

Mrs. Younge's directions did not take him very far—only to the end of the street to the Two-Headed Swan. Darcy's imposing, well-dressed figure afforded him prompt attention when he stepped through the inn doorway, and the innkeeper directed him to the room where a Mr. and Mrs. Wickham were staying.

Darcy rapped on the door. There came the sound of voices and movement from within.

'About time,' called out a familiar voice. The bolt on the door was slid back. 'How long does it take to get a jug of beer in this—?'

Wickham gave a start and tried to close the door again, but Darcy had already put one foot inside and now exerted all his strength to force his way in. There was a little squeal of surprise, and a young woman jumped up from her seat near the tiny fire.

'Darcy!' said Wickham, giving a dry laugh. 'To what do I owe this honour?'

'The word *honour* has no place in your mouth, Wickham. Miss Bennet, are you well and unharmed?'

Lydia Bennet jumped up to stand beside Wickham. 'Mr. Darcy, upon my word—what a surprise! Of course I am well; I am with my darling

Wickham. The only thing that I do not consider well is that we have to stay shut up in here. The innkeeper is *so* disagreeable—he will not let us out. We are as good as prisoners, and I have yet to see a thing of the city!’ She pouted in a girlish manner.

‘Are you . . .’ Darcy looked between them. ‘Married?’

Wickham smirked and Lydia tossed her dark curls. ‘We soon shall be,’ she said. ‘But we can hardly marry when we are as good as prisoners here, can we?’

‘Your family is most anxious for you, Miss Bennet. Let me escort you to them. You have an aunt and uncle nearby; let me take you to them this instant.’

Lydia laughed at him. ‘I am not going to my Uncle Gardiner!’ she cried. ‘Heavens above—that would be far worse than being shut up here! I would not leave my Wickham for all the world. We *are* to be married, you know, as soon as Wickham can arrange his money matters. Is that not so, my dear?’

Wickham only smiled down at her.

‘Outside,’ Darcy ordered him. ‘I will speak with you alone.’

‘If there’s a jug of beer in it—nay, a bottle of good wine—then I shall be happy to oblige you,’ said Wickham with a mocking bow.

Darcy did not reply, but Wickham followed him from the room. Lydia protested loudly at being left behind, but Wickham told her to cease her complaining and he would bring her back some dinner.

Darcy chose the quietest corner of the inn while Wickham called cheerfully for food and wine to be brought.

‘So what are you doing here?’ Wickham asked when they were sat facing one another. ‘I cannot account for it at all.’

‘I hold myself responsible in part for your current reprehensible situation,’ said Darcy. ‘If I had not kept secret your true character from the neighbourhood of Meryton, then you would have been guarded against. Instead you have been at liberty to once again wreak havoc on unsuspecting families, dishonouring their daughters in the most despicable manner and no doubt running up debts wherever your vicious propensities lead you.’

A servant brought two glasses and a bottle of wine. Wickham poured himself a glass and drained it. He grinned at Darcy. ‘Still the same old stuffy prude, hey Fitz?’

Darcy's patience snapped, and he reached across the table, grabbing Wickham by his coat collar with both hands and pulling him towards him. 'If you do not do exactly as I say,' he growled, 'then you will find yourself rotting in a debtors' jail, and I will ensure that no one pays a penny towards your debts or to ease your comfort. You will *never* leave!'

He released him and sat back down, breathing hard.

Wickham hurriedly poured himself another glass of wine, but his hands were shaking. 'And what is it you want me to do?' he asked sullenly.

'Marry that foolish girl, move as far away as possible with her, and never let me see your face again.'

'The last part I'll do with pleasure,' said Wickham, recovering some of his indolence, 'but as to marrying Lydia, I really do not wish to be saddled with a penniless wife.'

'You *will* marry her. You will not ruin her and all her family.'

'How am I to settle anywhere and support a wife? I have no money. I have not the living at Kympton that was promised me—'

'Do not speak of that,' said Darcy in a warning tone. 'We both know the shameful history that has lost you all that my father hoped for you. Do not tarnish his memory by mentioning it again. I will purchase you a commission in another regiment, and you will make the best of it.'

'I'm weary of military life,' said Wickham. 'I am sure I should do better at court; that would suit me very well.'

'There are more than enough gamesters and knaves at court. You may put your talents to serving your country, not debauching it.'

Wickham began eating the bread and roast beef the servant had brought. He appeared to be chewing over all these new changes of circumstance as he chewed his food.

'I suppose you have a string of debts behind you in Hertfordshire,' said Darcy.

Wickham shrugged. 'A few debts of honour.'

'I shall need them all listed. You cannot enter a new commission with undischarged debts. Miss Bennet must give me the address of her aunt and uncle. If she will not consent to leave with me this night, then I must insist that she come with me tomorrow. She will remain at her uncle's house until the marriage takes place.'

'Her uncle lives in Gracechurch Street. You'll have to find me some better lodgings also. This place is ghastly. The beer is as watery as the

Thames, and the staff have no manners. Suspicious, rude rascals every one of them, and not a single pretty maid anywhere.'

'Be ready to leave in the morning,' said Darcy, feeling he could not bear to spend one minute more in Wickham's presence.

'Just one question before you go,' said Wickham, leaning back against the wooden settle. 'Why are you going to all this trouble for a little coquette of a girl whom you barely know? Ah, perhaps it's because your great friend Bingley wants to marry the eldest Bennet girl. Very pretty young lady she is too, though a bit too chaste for my liking. But, no—Lydia did say that he'd gone and jilted her. I'm sure she did. So what can be your motive?'

'I do not have to give you any motive beyond what I've already stated.' Darcy stood up and put his hat on.

'You can't force me, you know. There are laws about forcing someone to marry against his will.'

'If you did not want to marry her, you had no business seducing her away from her family. But I suppose you thought her easy prey? I suppose you considered she had not brothers or friends to protect her? Well, you were wrong. I will stand in place of a brother, and you *will* marry her.'

'I hardly seduced her. She practically threw herself at me.' He continued eating. 'I seem to have that effect on young ladies,' he said with his mouth full. 'But the last time you defended the honour of a sister, you did not insist on my marrying her.'

It took all of Darcy's self-restraint to ignore this last taunt and leave before his anger boiled over. It would not do to have both himself and Wickham carted off to the town gaol for fighting. That would in no way resolve the situation.

'There's one thing you have not told me,' Wickham called after him. 'One thing of the utmost importance.'

Darcy paused. He would not look back, but he listened.

'You have not said how much dowry my good lady is to have upon our marriage. A man and his wife cannot live on nothing; we must have some capital to start out on, or I shall be obliged to seek a wife of better means.'

'Be ready in the morning,' Darcy replied.

'Do pay the man on your way out, Darcy, my good fellow, for the suspicious old blockhead won't let me leave the place until I've settled up.'

Darcy did speak to the innkeeper on his way out. 'I will return in the morning,' he told him, 'and I will settle the bill of Mr. Wickham. But I

advise you to set a close watch over his door, for if he attempts to flee, then his bill cannot be paid.'

'Ho, it's like that, is it?' said the innkeeper. 'I see a good deal of that, sir, and no man shall get by me without paying his bill!' And he called for a large, grim-looking man and gave him orders to be extra watchful of the fellow in the blue coat. He was to be escorted back to his room when he was done eating, and no one was to leave it till the bill was settled in full.

A MOST IMPRUDENT MARRIAGE

Mr. Gardiner was astonished to see Darcy ushered into his library early next morning.

‘I have found them, sir,’ Darcy told him, marching in with barely any greeting. ‘I called yesterday evening, but you were not at home. There’s no time to delay. I will bring Miss Bennet here directly, if you will receive her. Then we can arrange matters regarding her marriage and the financial settlements.’

‘Settlements?’ said Mr. Gardiner, still astounded by this sudden appearance.

‘Mr. Wickham has debts. And he requires the terms of Miss Bennet’s dowry to be laid out. I do not pretend that it will be easy to come to arrangements with him. I know him too well; he will demand much and hold out little in return, but we shall have to negotiate what we can.’

‘I do not think Lydia has any dowry,’ said Mr. Gardiner faintly. ‘Or, not much to speak of. I shall do what I can by her, of course—’

‘I shall take care of it,’ said Darcy. ‘I will brook no resistance, Mr. Gardiner: I *will* have my way in this. Mr. Wickham has only succeeded in his vile schemes because I was too proud to make his true character known. I will bear the consequences. Please send word for your lawyer to call this afternoon, and I will bring the unfortunate couple here to arrange matters. I will not rest until everything is satisfactorily concluded.’

IT WAS repugnant and distasteful to have to spend so many long hours with Wickham and Mr. Gardiner's lawyer, wrestling out the financial terms of the marriage. Darcy was glad when the last paper was signed and he could leave London and return to Pemberley for some days' respite. He felt grubby and wrung-out from all the proceedings. But it was done. Miss Lydia Bennet was in the care of her aunt and uncle, Wickham was secured in lodgings, the marriage license was applied for, and Darcy would return the following week to witness their marriage and see the end of the disgraceful affair.

The only thing that had given him patience to endure the past days was the thought of Elizabeth. It was all for her. Though she might never look upon him in kindness again, though they may never even meet again, yet he had redeemed her future; she would not be disgraced and condemned for her sister's folly. She would not be denied a respectable marriage because of her sister's infamy. All had been covered over. His own conscience was clear, and he had the satisfaction of knowing that the woman whose welfare he cared for most deeply was now secured from social disgrace.

Another thought had spurred on his efforts with Wickham's situation; he had grown by degrees to think differently of Bingley's romantic sensibilities. Bingley had never regained his full humour and happy manners since leaving Netherfield. Clearly his attachment to the elder Miss Bennet had been more than a passing preference; this time it would seem that he really had fallen in love. If that was so, then why should the reasons against the union still stand? He would have married Elizabeth if she had accepted him. Why should Bingley not be free to make the same choice?

Had the youngest Bennet sister brought disgrace upon the family, it would have been a shocking injury to all the sisters, for scandal would haunt them wherever they went. But now Miss Jane Bennet was as free of that injury as Elizabeth. This was another satisfying motive for Darcy's exertions. If Elizabeth Bennet were correct, as she had every reason to be, then the eldest Miss Bennet might well return Bingley's regard. If so, Darcy was not going to interfere with his friend's happiness a second time. He had learnt his lesson, thanks to the reproofs of Elizabeth.

THE MARRIAGE WAS MADE. The affair was concluded. Darcy returned to Pemberley to carry out his next act of conciliation.

‘Go to Netherfield?’ said Bingley in surprise. ‘I thought it did not please you one jot to be in that neighbourhood!’

‘Not at all,’ said Darcy. ‘Next to Pemberley, there is no finer place for riding and hunting. Let us pay a short visit and see how all our old acquaintances get on.’

Bingley stared in amazement at him. ‘But I thought you hated everyone in Hertfordshire!’

‘Not at all,’ repeated Darcy. ‘Let’s go down for a spot of hunting.’

Bingley was quiet for some time. He seemed to be musing over thoughts. ‘Are you certain you think it a good idea?’ he asked. There was a hidden meaning in his voice. Darcy understood it.

‘I do think it a good idea, Bingley. It may be that I was wrong in my conjectures about a certain acquaintance of yours in Hertfordshire. I may have judged too hastily. I may have clouded my power of seeing with my own faulty designs. If that is so, I am anxious to rectify matters.’

Bingley looked thoughtful again. ‘I would to Heaven that you were wrong, Darcy, in all you said last November. Much as I respect you and would be led by you in all things, yet I long to find old acquaintance as dear to me as ever I wish it to be.’

Darcy could not speak at that time of his own mirrored hopes on finding a certain young lady in Hertfordshire possessing kindly feelings towards himself. There were more hopes to be assessed at Longbourn than Bingley could guess at.

‘Then let us delay not one day,’ said Darcy. ‘Send your man ahead to make ready, and we’ll leave as soon as you wish it.’

BINGLEY’S SPIRITS were restless with excitement and anticipation the whole of the journey down to Netherfield. It was all Darcy could do to restrain his friend from riding directly to Longbourn the moment they entered the vicinity.

‘Bingley, it will not do,’ said Darcy. ‘Can you suppose showing yourself to Miss Bennet in a mud-spattered riding cloak and looking as travel-worn

as you do will ingratiate yourself with the young lady?’

‘You are right,’ said Bingley, looking down at himself. ‘A gentleman should never present himself before his fair lady without first having a bath.’

THE VISIT to the Bennets was undertaken by a newly washed and dressed Bingley.

Darcy had never felt comfortable in the presence of Mrs. Bennet. Her manners towards him had never been much above civil, while, by contrast, she fawned over Bingley as though the crown prince himself had deigned to visit. How differently he had felt in the company of Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner—with them he had been at liberty to treat them as friends. What a wonder that Mr. Gardiner’s own sister could be so contrary.

Darcy forced his eyes not to dwell too much upon Elizabeth. He was very aware of her sitting at the other end of the room. She looked grave, and after a few words of greeting to them, she remained silent the whole time of their short visit. He made the effort of enquiring after her aunt and uncle, hoping that would open the conversation between them, but she seemed a little confused by his mentioning them. Perhaps she was overcome with unhappy recollections of the last scene he had shared with her as she waited in great distress for Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner that morning at the inn in Lambton. Perhaps every memory of him was wrapped up with unfortunate associations. Perhaps she wished him away for this very reason. He felt the hope he had been nurturing dwindle. At Pemberley, he’d thought he had detected her growing warmth towards him, but now she showed none. He had not the opportunity in such company to make a concerted effort to rouse her to speak to him. Despite this disappointment, however, he did take care to observe Miss Jane Bennet; he was determined to evaluate her response to his friend. Did she love him or not?

‘It is a long time, Mr. Bingley, since you went away,’ said Mrs. Bennet.

Bingley agreed that it was.

‘I began to be afraid you would never come back again. People did say you meant to quit the place entirely at Michaelmas, but, however, I hope it is not true. A great many changes have happened in the neighbourhood since you went away. Miss Lucas is married and settled. And one of my own daughters. I suppose you may have heard of it? Mr. George Wickham

and my dear Lydia. Who would have thought it—she the youngest of her sisters being the first of them to marry?’

‘My congratulations, madam,’ said Bingley, giving an awkward glance at Darcy.

Darcy was careful to keep his countenance expressionless. Bingley knew nothing of his involvement in the marriage; it was another secret. No one in the room knew of it. He glanced at Elizabeth to see her reaction, but her eyes were fixed downwards on the sewing in her lap.

‘It is a delightful thing, to be sure, to have a daughter well married,’ continued Mrs. Bennet, ‘but at the same time, Mr. Bingley, it is very hard to have her taken such a way from me. They are gone to a place quite northward, and there they are to stay I do not know how long. His new regiment is there. I suppose you have heard of his leaving the duke’s regiment?’

Elizabeth had flushed with colour, and as though to silence any more words from her mother on the subject of Wickham, she hurriedly asked Bingley whether he meant to make any stay in the country at present.

‘A few weeks, I believe,’ he answered.

‘When you have killed all your own birds, Mr. Bingley,’ said Mrs. Bennet, ‘I beg you will come here and shoot as many as you please on Mr. Bennet’s manor. I am sure he will be vastly happy to oblige you and will save all the best coveys for you.’

Elizabeth sank back in her chair.

‘You are quite a visit in my debt,’ Mrs. Bennet continued to Bingley, ‘for when you went to town last winter, you promised to take a family dinner with us as soon as you returned. I have not forgot, you see; and I assure you, I was very much disappointed that you did not come back and keep your engagement.’

Bingley looked a little silly at this reflection and said something of his concern at having been prevented by business. He and Darcy then rose up and made their farewells, Bingley agreeing good-naturedly to Mrs. Bennet’s invitation to come and dine in a few days’ time.

‘Upon my word!’ exclaimed Bingley as they rode away. ‘She is as much an angel as ever she was! She seemed rather quiet, however; did you think so, Darcy?’

‘I think it is difficult for any of the Miss Bennets to get many words in while their mother is present.’

‘True,’ said Bingley. ‘Perhaps when we dine there, I will have a better chance of speaking with her. Perhaps that will determine whether or not she returns my regard.’

DINING OUT

The listless, unhappy air that had haunted Bingley for the past nine and a half months had lifted. In its place was a new expectancy, with a hint of anxiety, as though he were in great need of resolution of something. Darcy deemed it wise not to interfere with his friend's inward wrestling. When Bingley was keen for conversation and activity, Darcy obliged him; when Bingley was absorbed in his own thoughts and wandered about his grounds in solitary musing, Darcy took himself away on horseback. He had plenty of his own musings to keep him company.

He had been acutely disappointed by the brief meeting with Elizabeth two days earlier, for she had not seemed pleased to see him. Indeed, she had seemed decidedly uncomfortable during the whole of the short visit. The tentative intimacy they had been moving towards while at Pemberley seemed wholly vanished.

Perhaps she had been showing mere politeness to him at Pemberley; perhaps the sight of him stirred up unhappy memories that she would rather not be reminded of. Perhaps there really was no hope. He was not going to repeat his error of six months ago: he was not going to presume upon her welcoming his attentions. Nothing had humiliated him in his life so deeply as her rejection of him. He would make no second move towards her without encouragement.

Perhaps seeing her this evening, when he and Bingley dined at Longbourn, might offer a new opportunity for them to renew their friendship; it might give him some insight into what her feelings towards him now were. It would be a crushing blow to feel he had lost her forever,

but he would not renew his addresses to her without some sign from her that she welcomed them. If Elizabeth Bennet were decided against him, then he would never come into Hertfordshire again.

THERE WAS a large party gathered at Longbourn that evening. Darcy was not pleased to find himself seated beside Mrs. Bennet. Of all the people at the table, she was the least-desired dining partner he could have wished for. Memories of Caroline Bingley's mocking voice came to him, asking him how he would like Mrs. Bennet for a mother-in-law. The thought was no more agreeable now than it had been then. But the sight of Elizabeth at the opposite end of the table roused him to feel that he could endure even that unwelcome connection for her sake. But such thoughts served no purpose, for Elizabeth did not so much as look at him; he'd not had the opportunity to speak to her at all so far in the course of the evening.

There was some consolation to be had in seeing Bingley restored to his old humour. He was sat beside the eldest Miss Bennet, as much absorbed in her as ever he had been last autumn. Darcy watched Jane Bennet carefully; it was clear that she was happy with her partner's attentions. The likelihood of Bingley proposing to her now seemed inevitable, and judging by the looks of those about the table, especially those of the mistress of the house, everyone else concluded likewise.

The meal seemed interminably long, and Darcy was relieved when the last course was cleared away and the ladies retired from the table. There was the usual talk of shooting and city news among the men. But as only Darcy and Bingley were keen huntsmen and they alone could relate current news from town, the talk was not terribly stimulating. Mr. Bennet had a droll wit that would have been entertaining had Darcy been in the humour to enjoy it, but he was glad to leave the dining parlour and re-join the ladies; this would be his last opportunity to speak to Elizabeth.

He sought her out and made his way directly to her, but a crowd of ladies swarmed about her. He could find no way to get close enough to speak, and so he walked away only to be accosted by Sir William Lucas.

Sir Lucas was keen to reiterate for the third time that evening what a delightful experience it had been to wait upon Mr. Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh: what an honour it had been, what great condescension and kindness his aunt had shown in receiving him and his daughter when

they had visited. How magnanimous, how elevated were the minds and manners of the nobility. What beautiful grounds, what a magnificent park, how pleased he was to see his daughter well settled among such superlative neighbours. Darcy absent-mindedly agreed with all of Sir William's observations and accepted the compliments to his aunt with as much civility as he could muster. He extracted himself as early as he could and returned again to where Elizabeth sat.

This time she exerted herself to break away from her companions to speak to him. 'Is your sister at Pemberley still?' she asked.

'Yes, she will remain there till Christmas.'

'And quite alone? Have all her friends left her?'

'Mrs. Annesley is with her. The others have been gone down to the coast these three weeks.'

She said nothing more, and he stood by her for some minutes trying to think of something more to say, but every subject seemed awkward. There was danger of stirring up some difficult memory in every topic. He longed for the opportunity to be alone with her and speak openly, but it was not possible. A young lady demanded Elizabeth's attention, and he felt obliged to walk away, feeling all the disappointment of frustrated communication.

Card tables were now being set out, and he hoped he might secure a place at the same table as Elizabeth, but Mrs. Bennet seized upon him and begged that he would join her table for a game. It would be too rude to refuse; had not Elizabeth chided him for his unsociable manner of excluding himself? And so he took his place beside the lady of the house for the second time that evening, separated by the length of the room from Elizabeth a second time also.

The evening drew to a close, and it was time to say their farewells. For Darcy, it had been a tedious and unsatisfying evening, but Bingley was exuberant. He made nonsensical observations about the beauty of the night sky and the glory of the stars, and of angelic beings smiling down on him, for the best part of the ride back to Netherfield.

DARCY NEEDED to be in London sometime that week to meet with his lawyers, and there seemed no point in delaying his stay at Netherfield. The two meetings at Longbourn had given him nothing to hope for, and he felt he would sooner be gone from the neighbourhood, for it was something of a

torment to stay there in his current state of mind. Before he left, he determined to clear his conscience before Bingley, something he had been desirous of doing for some time. He had come to the conclusion that he had not acted as he ought in the matter of separating his friend from Miss Jane Bennet. It was time for confession that there might be no secrets between him and Bingley, and no more impediments between Bingley and his feelings for Miss Bennet.

He told him everything.

‘Do you mean to say,’ cried Bingley, ‘that you knew Miss Bennet was three months in town and you hid it from me?’

‘I do. And I regret that I did so. It was too much like deceit, and I am sorry for it.’

‘And my own sisters—all of you—hiding it from me!’

It was rare to see Bingley so roused to indignation.

‘I have no excuse other than that I believed I was doing right at the time.’

‘And now you do not think you did right?’

‘No. Many circumstances have caused me to view things differently. If you truly esteem Miss Bennet above any other young lady of your acquaintance, then I have no right to interfere. You know your own mind and must make your own decisions.’

‘But you told me she did not care for me. You led me to believe that she did not return my feelings and that I was deluding myself. Has that opinion changed?’

‘It has. I have since spoken to a third party whose knowledge of Miss Bennet far outweighs my own, and what I have learnt, added to my recent observations of Miss Bennet at Longbourn, has brought me to the conclusion that I was wrong in my assumption of Miss Bennet’s feelings. I believe they may be quite the reverse of what I first thought.’

There was a silence. Bingley’s countenance was a sight to see. It was as though someone had lit a candle within a shuttered box, and the shutters were being removed one by one, so that the light grew steadily brighter.

‘So you believe she *would* accept me?’

‘I will not presume to say I know what any woman will say on such a matter. On such occasions, ladies may give an answer that is wholly unexpected. But will you forgive me for my arrogant interference if I said that I had great confidence in believing that she would accept you?’

‘I would forgive any man the world if I knew that she would have me and would make me the happiest of men!’

‘Then you must ask her. There is no other resolution to this affair.’

Bingley beamed at him. The old Bingley was returned. The shadows of disappointment and loss were banished. Darcy laughed to see his happiness, and for a moment his own bitter pain was forgotten in his friend’s joy.

FAMILY PRIDE

‘Pardon me, are you well, sir?’

‘What? Did you speak, Hodson?’

‘I did, sir,’ said Darcy’s senior valet, ‘to inform you that your horse is made ready.’

‘Horse? Did I ask for my horse?’

‘You did, sir. You requested it at breakfast. I believe you thought to ride out before your business appointments in Holburn.’

‘Yes. So I did.’ Darcy got up from his desk where he had been sat staring into the air with a blank sheet of paper set before him. He wondered to whom it was he had sat down to write. He seemed to be moving in a fog these past days; he could not settle at nor engage with anything.

‘Your riding coat, sir,’ said Hodson, holding out the article. Darcy allowed his valet to put it on him and would have walked out, but Hodson called out, ‘Your boots, sir!’

Darcy looked down at his thin house shoes. What was the matter with him?

TOWN RIDES WERE NEVER as satisfactory to Darcy as a ride in the country. One could only walk sedately through the busy streets, then break into a trot upon reaching the wider spaces of the royal parks. He felt oppressed that morning by the proximity of so many people, all touching their caps to him or stopping to bow as he passed by. So many eyes upon him, especially so

many pairs of eager eyes belonging to mamas with their unmarried daughters out for a morning stroll or ride.

He must finish up his business in town as fast as he could that he might return to Pemberley and the refuge of wide, open fields and empty lanes and his private riverside and woodland walks. But that morning even the thought of the usual consolations of Pemberley did not comfort him, for he suddenly felt that taking solitary walks about his estate seemed a dreadfully lonely thing. For the first time in his life, he felt that something was wanting; something was missing. He wanted a companion. He wanted someone to walk with him in the early morning freshness of the day and by the golden light of the early evening. But not just anybody would do—he wanted one particular person at his side. Only one person in the world could he imagine beside him, transforming Pemberley from a house into a home. A home to raise a family in. A home to grow old in. Miss Elizabeth Bennet's was the face and figure he saw walking beside him along the river, seated opposite him at the dining table, lying beside him every night: the first and last person in the world he saw and spoke to at the opening and closing of each day.

After having to be reminded twice by his groom that he was riding in the wrong direction, Darcy gave up on his ride and returned home. He was thinking of Bingley as he walked into the house, wondering if his friend were experiencing greater success with his romantic hopes than he, when, as if in accordance with his thoughts, he saw a letter on the table in the entrance hall with Bingley's scrawling handwriting on it.

'Letter just arrived, sir,' said the footman, presenting it to him.

Darcy broke the seal and read as he walked down the long hall, his booted steps resounding on the marble tiled floor. Bingley's letters were never more than a few hastily scribbled lines, and this one was no exception, except that it was even shorter than usual, and the writing was leaning far forward as though the writer had no time to spare and could not contain the excitement of his words.

My angel is mine, and I am the happiest man in the world.

You do not have to dance at our wedding, but there can be no wedding without you as my groomsman.

B.

Darcy sat down at his desk and read the note once more, then tossed the letter down with a smile. He was glad for him. And how astonishing that he

did feel glad for him! How far his own feelings on the matter had altered these past months.

There was a knock at the door. A footman appeared and opened his mouth to make an announcement, but before the words were uttered, he was pushed aside by the rapid advancement of a broad and stately figure in black silk and lace. The indomitable figure marched in, demanding, 'Where is he? Where is my nephew? I must speak to him *immediately*!'

'Aunt Catherine!' exclaimed Darcy, rising from his desk. 'I did not expect this pleasure.' Lady Catherine did not notice that the word 'pleasure' was accompanied by a look that expressed no such sentiment.

'Please be seated,' said Darcy unnecessarily, for Lady Catherine had already seated herself in the largest of the chairs near the fireplace. Her black silk skirts billowed out about her like a thundercloud.

'To what do I—' Darcy was cut off mid-sentence.

'Tell me it is not true!' demanded Lady Catherine in her deep, resonant voice. 'I have come directly to hear it from you—I must have this scandalous falsehood reputed!'

'Scandalous false—?'

'It cannot be! I demand to hear it from your own lips! That insupportable, ungracious, upstart, scheming—'

'Dear madam—what or whom are you speaking of?' Had his aunt lost her reason?

'Why, who else could I be speaking of but that . . . that . . . *Bennet girl*!'

Darcy stared at her. His aunt was turning a most unhealthy shade of plum, and he moved to the table where wine was kept ready for his convenience and poured a glass. 'Drink this, Aunt; you seem distressed.' She waved it away as though it were a vexatious insect.

'Tell me!' she half-wailed. 'Are you engaged to her?'

Darcy was silent a moment. 'I am not engaged to anyone, ma'am.'

His aunt stared back at him, then she leaned back against her chair, put a hand to her chest, and closed her eyes, as though she were recovering from a great distress.

'Do drink this, Aunt, and when you are well, you may tell me what all this is about.'

Darcy perched on a chair opposite.

'You *are* engaged, Fitzwilliam,' said Lady Catherine, when she had taken a sip of wine. 'It is an engagement of a peculiar nature, to be sure, but

you must know that it was always the dearest wish of your mother and myself that you and Anne should be destined for each other.'

Darcy shook his head, 'Dear Aunt,' he began in as soothing a voice as he could muster, 'I know your hopes on that matter, but you must also acknowledge that poor Anne is in no way strong enough to contemplate marriage and the undertaking of all that being the mistress of Pemberley entails. Forgive me, Aunt; I would not wish to disappoint you, but I think of Anne only as a sister, and she likewise thinks towards me as a brother. There is no understanding between us of there ever being anything more.'

'Do not say so!' cried Lady Catherine, sitting up again. 'The uniting of your fortunes, the connection of the noble lineage between the families—it is in every way a perfect and most desirable union!'

'Anne is not well,' said Darcy in a firmer voice. 'Would you suffer her to endure the strain of childbearing? Would you see her life endangered in order to regenerate the family lineage?'

Lady Catherine made a cry of vexation and threw herself against her cushioned chair back. There were a few minutes of silence. Darcy thought it unwise to speak first, though he was full of curiosity to know why his aunt had mentioned Miss Bennet upon her arrival.

'If your marriage to Anne is not to be,' began Lady Catherine in a voice so full of sad resignation that Darcy pitied her, which was not a sentiment she often aroused in him, 'if you should determine to choose another, then you will certainly take care to choose well. I am your nearest relation, Fitzwilliam. I am almost the closest family member you have, and I counsel you, nay, I *demand* that you will honour the family name by marrying well.'

'Aunt Catherine, if I marry, I shall choose my wife on the grounds of compatibility and affection.'

'Yes, yes,' said Lady Catherine dismissively, 'those things are all very well, but they are secondary. They are not the most important things. The most important things are good blood, good name, and good money. The noble lines must not be polluted, the splendid wealth of your estate must not be diminished—'

'Aunt Catherine, if I marry, I will marry as I see fit. This is one matter upon which I will not be dictated to. I will certainly act in a manner that will secure my own happiness, and I hope that such a circumstance would suffice to give pleasure to those who care about me.'

‘Since when did you have such foolish notions?’ asked his aunt sharply. ‘Neither the Fitzwilliams nor the Darcys ever held to such romantic ideas when it came to marriage. We did our duty!’

‘I believe my parents were most happy in their compatibility and affection,’ argued Darcy.

‘Oh, Anne always had a compliant nature. She would have made herself compatible with anyone, but even she had much to put up with. I daresay there are few wives who do not; such is our lot.’

Darcy stiffened at this dismissal of his parents’ happiness but did not pursue the subject, only replying, ‘I have no intention of making a wife of mine “put up with” me against her own inclinations. That would not suit me at all. I look for an equal, a partner, a true companion, else I would sooner remain a bachelor.’

‘No more of that romantic nonsense, Fitzwilliam. I cannot bear it! But at least you have satisfied me on one point, which is the purpose of my visit—you have acknowledged that you have not entered into any foolish engagement with *that* person, and that is enough for now. Of course, I should have known it was a scandalous falsehood. I should have paid it no heed, but it came from so sure a source—my own parson heard it from his wife’s family—therefore I had to expose it as false. I had to ask her directly to contradict it.’

‘Ask her directly?’ repeated Darcy. ‘What can you mean by that, ma’am?’

‘I mean just what I said. Am I not always frank and direct?’

Darcy’s eyes darkened. ‘Aunt Catherine, have you been to speak with Miss Bennet in Hertfordshire?’

‘Have you not been listening to me, Fitzwilliam? Is that not what I said? I wanted to hear it from her own lips—and what insolent lips they are! I wanted to hear her declare that the abominable rumour was false. I wanted to hear that she was not engaged to you and never would be!’

Darcy could only stare at his aunt in dismay.

‘She refuted it, of course, but the impudent girl would not promise me that she would never enter into an engagement with you—as if you could ever be prevailed upon to ask her! With such relations—an uncle in trade, a sister so scandalously married, and married to the son of your father’s own steward—could she think it possible that you could deign to be the brother

of your father's steward? Ludicrous, disgraceful idea! Every feeling revolts against it!

'What do you mean, Aunt,' said Darcy slowly, 'in saying that she would not agree to never entering into an engagement?'

'I mean what I said, as I always do. I demanded that she tell me if she were engaged to you, and she confessed she was not. But she had the impudence, the insolence to tell me that if she were, it would be a match of no inequality, for she considers herself a gentleman's daughter—as if being the daughter of a man whose estate is entailed upon my own parson could place her in the same sphere as us! I demanded that she promise never to enter into any such engagement with you, and she flatly refused! I asked her if she were resolved to have you, and she had the impertinence to say that she resolved to act only to secure her own happiness—selfish, dishonourable, undutiful girl! I am heartily ashamed of her!'

'You did wrong in speaking to her, Aunt,' said Darcy gravely. But even as he spoke, he felt some new stirring within him: the tiniest unfurling of hope.

Aunt Catherine glared at him for his rebuke, but before she could gather breath, he stood up and walked away to the window. Her resonant voice gave vent to all that she thought of being told that she had done wrong—she who never did wrong—but her words swirled as ineffectually as mist behind Darcy. He remained looking out on the streets below while more interesting thoughts engaged his mind. If Miss Bennet had resolved never to accept him, she would surely have said so to his aunt. Could it be . . . ? Could it be that she would not make such a promise because there *was* a possibility she might accept him? There was only one way to find out. Only one way to put an end once and for all to this misery.

'I am sorry to leave you so abruptly, ma'am,' said Darcy, turning round. 'But I have an important meeting in Holburn that cannot be delayed, and on my return I shall be preparing to leave town, for I have another urgent matter to attend to. Please forgive me.' He bowed and left.

SINCERITY & FRANKNESS

Darcy returned to an empty house at Netherfield.

‘The master is at Longbourn, I believe, sir,’ the butler informed him while taking his cloak. ‘I had no word of your arrival, but I will prepare your usual chamber, sir.’

Though Darcy had no scruples in arriving unannounced at Bingley’s house, he shied away from the irregularity of turning up unexpectedly at the Bennets’ house in the middle of the afternoon. He would wait until the morrow. One more restless night would make little difference.

‘I cannot tell you how happy I am, Darcy,’ said Bingley next morning for the sixth time. They were riding across the fields to Longbourn. ‘I only wish you could know the same happiness—I wish all the world could know it—what a different place it would be if it did!’

Darcy only smiled in reply.

‘We did think, Jane and I, that we should like to try at matchmaking you with her sister, Elizabeth.’

Darcy still said nothing.

‘But Jane thinks that will be impossible, for it would bring you into a close connection with that Wickham fellow who lately married their sister. She thinks you dislike him a great deal too much to marry into the family.’

‘I dislike him with every fibre of my being,’ said Darcy. ‘He has no honour, no redeeming quality. I should despise him as a brother-in-law.’

‘My dear Jane was quite right after all,’ said Bingley, sounding as much satisfied that his Jane was as clear-sighted as she was beautiful as he was sorry that they could not pair Darcy up with her sister.

‘But if I had set my affections so fixedly on Miss Elizabeth Bennet as to want to marry her,’ said Darcy, ‘I would be a faint-hearted lover if I let one or two or even a whole family of undesirable relations thwart me, would I not?’

Bingley gave him a lopsided smile as though he could not tell if Darcy were in jest or in earnest. They reached the Bennet estate where Jane was watching at the window.

‘Shall we all walk out?’ Bingley suggested to the parlour full of Bennet ladies, to which he and Darcy had been admitted.

‘What an excellent idea,’ said Mrs. Bennet. ‘I never walk out, of course, but Jane will be glad to, and Lizzy is a great walker. Kitty, Mary, get your cloaks.’

Mary protested that she was too busy with her studies to walk, but the remaining party of five set out together. Bingley and Jane soon drifted ahead, too absorbed in one another to remember their companions. Kitty tarried behind, and Darcy and Elizabeth were left to one another’s company, though not alone enough to talk of anything other than generalities. This ought to be a gratifying situation to be in, but Elizabeth was strangely quiet, and they mostly walked in silence.

Darcy could not judge whether her quietness was from the same source of awkwardness that he felt himself, or from dislike at finding herself thrust into his company. If he had yet one silvery wish remaining, he mused, he would certainly wish at that moment for the opportunity and courage to speak frankly with Elizabeth and bring a resolution to this half-agony, half-hope that tormented him.

As if his wish were granted, they reached the turning for Lucas Lodge, and Kitty called out that she was just going to run down the lane and call on Maria Lucas. They were now truly alone, for Bingley and Jane were too far ahead to overhear them.

Darcy grappled in his mind for the right words to say; he wanted to open the conversation in a way that would enable him to discern Elizabeth’s feelings, but he could not think how to begin. He wished again for aid, and suddenly Elizabeth turned towards him and surprised him by speaking in an earnest tone.

‘Mr. Darcy, I am a very selfish creature, and, for the sake of giving relief to my own feelings, care not how much I may be wounding yours. I can no longer help thanking you for your kindness to my poor sister. Ever

since I have known it, I have been most anxious to acknowledge to you how gratefully I feel it. Were it known to the rest of my family, I should not have merely my own gratitude to express.'

'I am sorry, exceedingly sorry,' replied Darcy in surprise, 'that you have ever been informed of what may, in a mistaken light, have given you uneasiness. I did not think Mrs. Gardiner was so little to be trusted.'

'You must not blame my aunt. Lydia's thoughtlessness first betrayed to me that you had been concerned in the matter, and, of course, I could not rest till I knew the particulars. Let me thank you again and again, in the name of all my family, for the generous compassion which induced you to take so much trouble, and bear so many mortifications, for the sake of discovering my sister.'

'If you will thank me,' he replied, 'let it be for yourself alone. That the wish of giving happiness to you might add force to the other inducements that led me on, I shall not deny. But your family owes me nothing. I believe I thought only of you.'

Elizabeth was silent. After a short pause, Darcy took his courage in both hands and said, 'You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on the subject forever.'

There was another pause, and Darcy felt as though the world were holding its breath with him as he waited for her to answer.

'I . . .' she began hesitantly. 'My . . . affections . . . and wishes . . . are . . .'

The delay between her words was unbearable.

' . . . are quite changed.'

'Changed?' he repeated. 'They are changed?' She looked up at him, and she said nothing further, but her smile was quite lovely.

He felt a broad smile spreading across his own face, and laughter bubbled up inside his chest where a moment ago there had been only tightness.

'Yes,' she said, joining in with his laughter. 'Most utterly changed.'

Darcy had come to a standstill. She stopped also and waited for him. He put out a hand to her, and she placed her own in his. He hadn't intended to kiss her. It seemed somewhat undignified to kiss out in the open air, but there was no one to witness them, save a ruminating sheep. So he moved

closer to her, and when she did not pull away but indeed lifted her face to him, he bent down and met her lips with his own.

When they moved apart again, Elizabeth was flushed, but she looked wonderfully happy. What a joy it was to now have the right to gaze directly into those dark, smiling eyes.

They moved on, walking so close together that he could feel the warmth of her against his side. He had no awareness of his surroundings but was immersed in the landscape of his own heart and in the elation of being permitted to glimpse into Elizabeth's. There was so much to be said, and so much feeling accompanying every word.

'We have Lady Catherine to thank for my return here,' Darcy told her.

'Lady Catherine?' said Elizabeth in astonishment.

'She called on me in town and told me of her visit to you, for which I apologise. Yet her efforts to dissuade me against you had quite the opposite effect from that which she intended, for it taught me to hope. I knew enough of your disposition to be certain that, had you been absolutely decided against accepting me, you would have acknowledged it to my aunt, frankly and openly.'

Elizabeth laughed as she replied, 'Yes, you know enough of my frankness to believe me capable of that. After abusing you so abominably to your face, I could have no scruple in abusing you to all your relations.'

'What did you say of me that I did not deserve? My behaviour to you at the time was unpardonable. I cannot think of it without abhorrence.'

'We will not quarrel for the greater share of blame annexed to *that* evening,' said Elizabeth. 'Since then, we have both, I hope, improved in civility.'

'Did my letter soon make you think better of me?' Darcy asked. 'Did you, on reading it, give any credit to its contents?'

'I read it repeatedly. At first I was too blinded by anger to give it credit, but as my reason returned and I considered its contents carefully, I could not fail to acknowledge how blind I had been to the true nature of a certain person. In time, I also had to acknowledge that there was truth in what you said of my family.' Her voice faltered at these last words.

'I too have been blind,' he assured her, 'and I too have relations who do not always behave as I could wish. Above all, *I* did not behave as I would wish. I hope you have destroyed the letter.'

'The letter shall certainly be burnt, if you wish it.'

‘When I wrote that letter, I believed myself perfectly calm and cool, but I am since convinced that it was written in a dreadful bitterness of spirit.’

‘Think no more of the letter,’ Elizabeth urged. ‘The feelings of the person who wrote it and the person who received it are now so widely different from what they were then. You must learn some of my philosophy: think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure.’

‘You taught me a lesson,’ admitted Darcy, ‘one that ought not to be forgotten. By you, I was properly humbled. I came to you without a doubt of my reception. You showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased.’

‘Had you then persuaded yourself that I should accept you?’

‘Indeed, I had. What will you think of my vanity? I believed you to be wishing, even expecting my addresses.’

‘My manners must have been at fault, albeit unintentionally. I assure you, I never meant to deceive you, but my spirits might often lead me wrong. How you must have hated me after that evening!’

‘Hate you! I was angry perhaps at first, but my anger soon began to take a proper direction.’

‘I am almost afraid of asking what you thought of me when we met at Pemberley. You blamed me for coming?’

‘No, indeed; I felt nothing but surprise.’

‘Your surprise could not be greater than mine at being noticed by you.’

‘My object at that time,’ replied Darcy, ‘was to show you by every civility in my power that I was not so mean as to resent the past. I hoped to obtain your forgiveness, to lessen your ill opinion, by letting you see that your reproofs had been attended to. How soon any other wishes introduced themselves, I can hardly tell, but I believe it couldn’t have been more than half an hour after I had first seen you. Georgiana was pleased to make your acquaintance,’ he added, ‘and felt warmly attached to you from the first, which is not usual for her. She was most disappointed when you had to leave so unexpectedly.’

‘What a dreadful day that was,’ said Elizabeth. ‘Perhaps the worst day of my life. And when you left me at the inn, I was certain I would never see you again, that you must have been mortified and appalled to hear to what depths my own sister had fallen.’

‘Not at all. Appalled to hear that Wickham had again wrought so much harm upon those that I cared for. Outraged, dismayed, angry—I felt all such

feelings, but all were directed at him. Before I had even quitted the inn, I had resolved on finding him.'

'How kind, so very kind,' was all Elizabeth could quietly say. The subject was too painful to each to be dwelt on further, and they walked on without speaking of it again. Darcy put his hand over hers, which now rested on his arm, and determined that he would follow her philosophy—he would give no more heed to past unhappiness. The present was too wonderful, and the future so filled with hope.

CONNUBIAL FELICITY

‘Oh, Hill, what a day!’ cried Mrs. Bennet to her housekeeper. ‘Our Lizzy—married at last, and to such a handsome man, and *so* rich!’ Mrs. Bennet laughed in glee and clapped her hands like a child. She was sitting in bed with her frilled nightcap on.

Hill drew back the curtains and informed her mistress that it was a fine, dry day, and Miss Elizabeth’s wedding gown would suffer no harm from the winter mud that morning, for all the ground was hard-frosted. There was the sound of horse hooves outside, the noise ringing clearly in the stillness of the early morning, and Hill told her mistress that Mrs. Bingley had come, no doubt to help her sister dress for her wedding.

‘Tell Jane to come and see me before she goes to Lizzy,’ said Mrs. Bennet, reaching for the cup and saucer Hill had placed on her bedside table. ‘I want to know if she has received our new cloaks from town yet. They are to be lined with sable, Hill. Not rabbit, but sable, and we are all to have one as a gift to mark Lizzy’s wedding—is that not good of her? Was she not always the sweetest girl in the world?’

Hill agreed that Miss Jane, or Mrs. Bingley, as she now ought to be called, had always been the sweetest girl in the world.

THE WEDDING CEREMONY was duly performed, and everyone was glad to hurry out of the cold church and towards the promise of a good fire and plenty of festive victuals at Longbourn manor. Mrs. Bennet took Mr. Bennet’s arm. They had almost passed between the pair of yew trees that

marked the entrance to the churchyard when she saw a ragged figure with a grin full of brown teeth standing a little way off beside a holly bush. The old woman had a robin sitting on her shoulder.

Mrs. Bennet stopped, let go of Mr. Bennet's arm, and hurried closer to see the old woman. 'It *is* you!' she exclaimed to the wisewoman. 'Good mother, you never did help me get a son, but I shall not hold it against you, for our fortunes have turned at last. I shall not be left destitute if Mr. Bennet should die, for my eldest daughters have got themselves *such* good husbands—but I would beseech you to leave a blessing on my daughter on this her wedding day. Indeed, it is most lucky that I should see you this very morning. I beg you will come back with us and take a plate and a cupful of cheer, for it is such a happy day!'

'Never did help thee get a son?' said the old woman. 'But who is that yonder I see, beside the fair-haired beauty?'

'Why, that is Mr. Bingley.'

'And who is that yonder I see, standing with his new bride?'

'Why, that is Mr. Darcy.'

'And what are they to thee?'

'Why, they are my sons by marriage.'

'Sons aplenty,' said the wisewoman. 'Never say that no one helped thee get sons.'

Mrs. Bennet looked back over her shoulder at her two handsome sons-in-law, and when she turned back again, the old woman was gone.

A YEAR PASSED BY, cycling through the seasons with the waxing and waning of the moon. There were many changes that year. Darcy no longer walked alone beside the river walk at Pemberley: he walked with his new wife, and every day marvelled that he had her beside him. Elizabeth had insisted that Georgiana should live always at Pemberley.

'The poor child has spent enough years moving about the country from city to coast, and I know she does not care for such a gypsy-like existence, for she told me so. She likes to be at Pemberley, though she does not like to be alone there for months at a time. It is time to settle down, Fitzwilliam.'

Those had been her words early into their marriage, and Darcy found he liked very much to be told what it was he must do when the person telling him, in so charming a manner, was Elizabeth. He agreed heartily, and Georgiana could not have been more delighted on being told that she no longer had to move about with the seasons. They were all come home to Pemberley to stay for the best part of every year.

‘I have had some excellent news from Jane,’ Elizabeth told Darcy as they walked one summer evening after dinner. ‘I have been eager to tell you all day, though you may have received word from Bingley and learned of it already.’

‘I have not received any letter from Bingley since his marriage,’ said Darcy. ‘He never liked writing, and now that he has a wife who is so obliging as to undertake all his correspondence for him, I doubt I shall ever receive one of his scrappy, illegible scrawls again.’

‘Jane writes to say that they have determined to leave Netherfield. They are going to look for a permanent house of their own. They may even build one, if they cannot find anything suitable. But the best part is that they are going to look in this very county. Is not that wonderful? We shall be neighbours! Mama shall miss them dreadfully, I daresay, but I confess I well understand their desire to move away from Hertfordshire. One can be settled *too* close to one’s own family, unless the relation is a most beloved sister of the highest mind and purest heart!’

‘That is good news. I’m very glad to hear it. I have missed seeing much of Bingley this past year, and I’m glad you will have your sister near.’

‘Georgiana will love Jane,’ said Elizabeth happily. ‘Who could not love Jane? She is the best creature in the world—and there is more good news, for Jane is expecting a child very soon.’ Elizabeth’s voice quavered just a little as she spoke the last words.

Darcy understood the reason and pressed her hand more tightly in his own. Elizabeth was disappointed that after a year of marriage, she had yet to have the hope of a child of their own. She did not dwell on it, for she was too sunny-natured to be melancholic, but he knew it was her dearest wish to have a family.

THREE MORE YEARS PASSED BY, and twenty miles from Pemberley there now stood a handsome, newly built manor house of local stone. It was a house with a fair prospect standing on a gentle hill, encircled by stout woodland, good well-drained meadows, and an extensive deer park. The owner of this new estate was the genial Mr. Bingley, with his beautiful wife and handsome young son and heir of three years.

At Pemberley, Mr. and Mrs. Darcy remained childless, which was considered a great pity by all the villagers and estate families. Miss Georgiana Darcy was now a young woman of twenty years, and it was said that she was being courted by a Mr. Osborne-Parry. He was the eldest son of a baron, and though he was not very handsome, yet he was pleasing enough in looks and known to be of good reputation. He was a quiet young man who could play music as well as Miss Georgiana, and he came from a family that were great patrons of musicians. At this rate, the wives of the village and estate said, Miss Georgiana would be the first to provide a son and heir to the Pemberley estate, which would be a pity in part, for it would be nice to see the master have a son of his own. He was very good to the head shepherd's boy and had sponsored him, as well as a godfather should, in paying for him to go to school. The boy showed such cleverness that it had been thought a shame to leave him shepherding when he could earn a fine living as a steward or bailiff, once he had some learning under his hat and collar.

There had always been whispers about the head shepherd's son. Some did say that he was the natural son of the master, but others scorned such an idea and said that he was the son of old Wickham's boy, the one who'd been brought up with the master but had turned out badly and had not been seen in the county for many years. Those who remembered the family said that the head shepherd's boy was the image of old Wickham: same colour hair and eyes, same way of walking and of putting his hands behind his back when he was talking with you. Fortunately, he seemed to have the same serious ways of old Wickham and not the dandy ways of old Wickham's son. Perhaps that was why the master took to him and looked to see him do well. The head shepherd's wife had done well by her family in taking the child in as a babe, for her house had never gone for aught; the master had taken good care of them all.

The estate families and villagers had something even more interesting to talk of in the early summer of that year: the news that the wisewoman had

returned to Pemberley Wood. Giles the woodcutter had seen her pass him by and would have known her anywhere, for he had been a boy of twelve when she had last been at Pemberley in those years of great blessing, when never a bread loaf failed to rise nor foal or calve to thrive. He said she looked the exact same as when he had seen her nigh on twenty or more years ago. She had passed him by with a basket upon her arm and a family of fox cubs walking on one side of her and family of rabbits on the other. The foxes had no inkling to pounce on the rabbits, and the rabbits had no fear of the foxes—it was a sight to see and true as daylight! What a good sign—long may she remain among them!

THE SANGUINE HOPE OF GOOD

Darcy first heard the rumours of the wisewoman's return from his valet, who had heard from Mrs. Reynolds, who had heard from the second floor housemaid, who was niece to the head woodcutter.

'Has anyone other than Giles seen her?' asked Darcy, most interested in this news, for it brought back many memories.

'No, sir.'

'Giles is a steady fellow,' said Darcy. 'Not one for fashioning stories.'

'No, sir. He's said to be as grounded as the old oaks he lives under, and he's not taken to fancies.'

'Then it must be true. And I am glad of it.'

'The whole estate is glad of it, sir.'

Georgiana was delighted to hear from her brother that the old wisewoman had returned. She knew many stories about her, some of them founded in truth and many exaggerated by the servants who had related them to her as a child.

'Is it true that she would turn away bad weather on harvest days with a lift of her finger?' asked Georgiana. 'And every sheep she spoke a word to had twins?'

'I have never seen a wisewoman,' said Elizabeth. 'There was one in our county when I was a small child, but my mother used to say she was as unreliable as a contrary hen, all cluck and cry and no egg to show for it.'

'Perhaps she was only a minor wisewoman,' said Georgiana. 'Our wisewoman is very powerful, I am sure. I wonder that we never had a faery godmother,' she thought aloud. 'My friend Penelope, the niece of Baroness

Wittelbach, has an excellent one who arranged a marvellous marriage for her with the heir of the Duke of Mondsey.'

'Our parents did not feel the need to rely on faery help,' said Darcy. 'They were inclined to modern ways. Our father used to say that fairfolk were for peasants and children, not for educated men. Let rationality and reason empower us to make our own decisions and not rely on otherworldly help. The old ways are passing away.'

'That must be why it is so rare now to see fairfolk,' said Georgiana wistfully. 'I wish I'd been born a hundred years ago when there were lots to be seen.'

'I do not see why there cannot be a happy marriage between reason and otherworldly help,' said Elizabeth. 'Good powers of reason are always to be striven for, but there is so much of the world and of our own minds that we cannot discern by reason alone. So much we cannot control by rationality. Let us embrace both. I should not be unhappy to have a faery godmother for my child.' Her words trailed away sadly, but she quickly rallied and smiled at Georgiana to drive away any unhappy associations.

Darcy said nothing more on the subject to his wife and sister, but he pondered the matter for many days.

His pondering led him to begin the habit of riding alone down to the woodlands beyond the river. There he would revisit the place where he had once seen the wisewoman when he had been a boy of eight. She had been sat upon a fallen log among the bluebells; he remembered that image clearly. It was late in the year for bluebells now, but tall spires of foxgloves grew around the place where the log had been. Darcy paced up and down and around the spot, sometimes sitting awhile, watching the movement of the stream and listening for the soft sound of a fish breaking the surface. For many weeks, he sat and wandered in that spot, hoping, waiting, but to no avail, for the wisewoman did not appear.

The foxgloves retreated, the honeysuckle bloomed and faded, and only the Michaelmas daisies remained along the edges of the woodland. Winter came, and nothing more was heard of the wisewoman, though the estate families rejoiced that not one of their elderly or young succumbed to the usual wintertime illnesses that year, nor did anyone go cold or unshod thanks to the diligence of the mistress of Pemberley, who took good care to make sure every family on the estate had warm clothes and blankets before the first fall of snow. It always snowed hard in the north of the kingdom in

winter. The village ponds iced over, and the snow settled into drifts under the cottage eaves. When the sleigh bells of the master and mistress of Pemberley rang out, the village children would run alongside the sleigh, waving to Mrs. Darcy, who always smiled and waved back.

‘There is something so magical about the world when all is white and sparkling as it is now,’ said Elizabeth, clutching her fur-lined cloak about her as she and Darcy rode along by sleigh one morning. ‘It is as though the world has turned into a different kingdom.’

Darcy called out to the driver to halt as they reached the crown of the gentle slope where Pemberley Wood met the meadow border. They always stopped at this spot, for the view was Elizabeth’s favourite. A footman in furred boots and hat helped her from the sleigh, and she wandered a little way off to look down on the snowy view over the meadows, stretching away to the little town of Lambton, whose white roofs could only be discerned by the ribbons of wood smoke rising up from the chimneys.

Darcy stood beside her. They did not speak, but their breath came in puffs and clouds. Darcy looked down at his wife, smiling at the pinkness of her nose in the cold and enjoying the way her eyes glittered more brightly in the crisp air.

‘Fitzwilliam, look!’ said Elizabeth, pointing towards a copse of trees close by. The figure of an old woman was shuffling through the snow. ‘The poor thing, she will freeze,’ said Elizabeth, hurrying to meet the figure. ‘Good mother, how is it you are out in so thin a shawl in such weather? Do let us take you home. Where do you come from?’

‘Where do I come from?’ said the old woman, showing a row of brown teeth in what might be a smile or a grimace. ‘ ’Tis been so long since I came that I sometimes forget. But I know where I’m going.’

‘Then let us take you home quickly,’ urged Elizabeth. ‘Fitzwilliam, do give her a covering from the sleigh.’

Darcy did not heed Elizabeth; he was too busy staring at the old woman.

‘Fitzwilliam, she is cold,’ urged Elizabeth.

‘I daresay she feels no cold,’ said Darcy. Elizabeth stared at him in astonishment. ‘I would gladly give you my own coat, if you would take it,’ said Darcy to the old woman. He gave a polite bow as he spoke.

‘I have no need of anything thou canst give me,’ said the old woman with another show of her brown teeth. ‘But thou art wanting what I can give thee.’

‘I am,’ said Darcy, with a note of urgency in his voice. ‘Would you help us?’

Elizabeth was looking from one to another. Something dawned upon her face. ‘Is she . . . are you . . .’ she said, turning to the old woman, ‘the wisewoman?’

The old woman was holding something out to Darcy. He opened his hand, and she poured a stream of something small and silver that tinkled like tiny sleigh bells as the small items filled his palm.

Darcy looked down at the handful of wishes he held. A sorrowful look came over his face.

‘What ails thee?’ asked the old woman. ‘Does my gift not please?’

‘You are very kind,’ said Darcy quietly. ‘But what I wish for cannot be given by the power of these. I am no longer a child to be satisfied with little things. I have a full-grown wish now.’

The old woman laughed in a cracked voice. She stepped forward and spoke quietly into Darcy’s ear. She moved away again, and a smile began stretching across Darcy’s usually serious face. The smile reached his eyes, and he laughed as he turned to Elizabeth.

‘But what are they?’ Elizabeth asked, taking a hand from under her cloak to touch the pile of shiny discs.

‘Wishes,’ he said. ‘Children’s wishes.’

‘I do not understand. Are they to give away to children?’ She turned back to enquire of the old woman but gave a gasp. ‘Fitzwilliam! Where did she go?’

Darcy laughed again and closed his hand over the wishes. ‘Thank you!’ he called out to the empty patch of snow where the woman had stood a moment ago.

Elizabeth was searching the ground. ‘Fitzwilliam, there are no footprints! What does it all mean? Why did she give you a handful of children’s wishes?’

‘Because, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth,’ he said as he held up one of the silver wishes, ‘each of these twelve wishes is to be given as a birthday gift to our child.’

‘Our child?’

‘Yes. *Our child.*’

‘If we had a child,’ said Elizabeth slowly. ‘Why only twelve?’

‘Because a child begins to outgrow faery tales and wishes from his or her twelfth year. So the wisewoman says. She ought to know; she is the wise one.’

‘Do you believe her?’ asked Elizabeth, looking hungrily at the wishes as though she hoped with all her heart that the new idea that had been kindled were true.

‘I do.’

GOOD FORTUNE

‘**W**hen shall Mrs. Bingley arrive?’ Georgiana asked. ‘Will she be here in time for luncheon? If she is, then I shall ask Cook to make his fruit jellies for little Charles.’

‘She hopes to make an early start and be here before noon,’ replied Elizabeth. ‘I should not like to trouble Cook regarding jellies; I am sure he has enough extra work in the preparations for tomorrow.’

‘A few extra jellies will make little difference,’ said Georgiana. ‘He will have to make up jelly to set the strawberry tarts.’

‘What a wonder that he could get strawberries so late in the year,’ said Elizabeth.

‘They have been brought in specially. They were grown in an indoor garden. Imagine that! Strawberry tarts are Aunt Catherine’s favourite dessert. We have tried to make all her favourite dishes for her.’

‘One less thing for her to find fault with,’ said Elizabeth with a wry smile.

‘Are you very nervous about seeing her?’ asked Georgiana, looking nervous herself. ‘Of course, you are not; you are never scared of anyone. I confess, I am scared of her.’

‘Well, you should not be,’ said Elizabeth. ‘I am glad she is coming; five years is far too long for a breach between family members. I am well prepared to meet all words of disapprobation with a smile. I shall even try very hard not to retaliate with words of my own.’

Georgiana looked horrified at the idea of Elizabeth and her fearsome aunt coming to verbal blows.

‘Don’t look so worried.’ Elizabeth laughed at her. ‘I promise I shall be on my very best behaviour. But she is, after all, coming to *our* home, and coming of her own volition. Therefore, I have every hope of her minding her manners as well as I mean to do.’

‘You are very good,’ said Georgiana, ‘especially after all those dreadful things she wrote about you when Fitzwilliam told her of your marriage. I do not think I could bear to see any person again who said such things of me. I did not think Fitzwilliam would ever forgive her.’

‘I am not one to dwell on the past and let it embitter the present. Most of us can say dreadful things when we are very angry. I believe the only two persons in the world I know of who are utterly incapable of saying a bad word, even under provocation, are my sister Jane, and yourself.’

‘Only because I usually cannot think of anything to say in the moment of anger,’ said Georgiana. ‘Oh, I do hope all will be well. I should be miserable to think of tomorrow being spoilt by Aunt Catherine being disagreeable.’

‘All will be well,’ Elizabeth assured her.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING was so glorious, it was as though the day had forgotten it was supposed to be one of early autumn and had decided to be midsummer all over again. Elizabeth, her sister Jane, and Georgiana drifted out towards the gardens after breakfast to walk among the late roses and sit beneath the rose arbour.

‘Have you much left to arrange for this afternoon, Lizzy?’ Jane asked. She turned her fair head to breathe in the fragrance of a rose that hung obligingly near to her on the trellised wall.

‘All is in hand,’ said Elizabeth. ‘Between Mrs. Reynolds and Plumtree, there is barely anything left for me to arrange. All I have to do is turn up, carrying the baby and smiling at everyone, and I am not sure I shall even get to carry her, for she is forever being whisked away by some doting aunt or sister.’ She was regarding Georgiana, who sat with baby Elizabeth nestled in the crook of her arm.

‘She is such a dear,’ said Georgiana, looking down at the tiny face.

‘If you please, ma’am,’ said a voice. A footman was walking across the grass towards them. ‘Lady Catherine de Bourgh has arrived.’

‘Oh, heavens!’ cried Elizabeth, jumping up from her arbour seat. ‘However did she manage to arrive so early?’

Before anyone could answer the question, a familiar voice sounded from beyond the wrought-iron gate to the rose garden. ‘Where are they? Where is everyone?’

The party of three stood hurriedly to curtsy to their unexpected guest.

‘Lady Catherine,’ called out Elizabeth as the said lady approached them. ‘Forgive my not being ready to meet you; I had no expectation of you arriving so early in the day. I cannot imagine how you made such excellent time in your journey.’

‘We arrived last night, of course,’ said Lady Catherine. Her eyes swept Elizabeth up and down as though she were sizing her up, assessing the improvement in the quality and fashion of her gown since she had last seen her as an unmarried young woman at Longbourn. ‘We stayed in the town. What is it called—Lambfoot or Lambston? We set out after breakfast.’

‘But where is Miss de Bourgh?’ asked Elizabeth. ‘I wish you had sent us word of your arrival at Lambton. Fitzwilliam would have hastened to fetch you himself, had he known.’

‘If I had wanted fetching, I would have asked for it. Anne was too tired to go even one mile further, so we stayed at the inn. Dreadful draughts in the bedchambers, and we had to get the servants up in the night to hang extra curtains and stop up the windows. Where is she? Where is my great-niece?’

‘Here she is, Aunt,’ said Georgiana, shifting the sleeping baby a little higher up on her arm so she could be seen more easily.

‘Is she healthy? Have the physicians examined her? I hope you sent to London for a physician? She has the Fitzwilliam nose. I assume you have called her a good Fitzwilliam name? Anne, or Catherine?’

‘Her father insisted she be named after her mother,’ said Elizabeth. ‘Her full name is Elizabeth Rose Anne.’

‘Rose? That sounds like an old fairfolk name, as all the flowery names are. I hope you are not intending to bring a faery godmother into the family? But of course, you cannot. Fitzwilliam’s blood is too diluted now, and you have not one drop of noble blood. You’ll call her Anne, of course. You cannot call her Elizabeth when there are two of you. You will not shorten it to something common like Eliza or Lizzy or, Heaven forbid—Betsy! I do so despise contractions; they are most vulgar.’

‘We may call her Beth,’ said Elizabeth, trying to keep her composure. In truth, she had not thought until that very moment of calling her anything of the sort, but she could not resist a little teasing to relieve her feelings of irritation at Lady Catherine. She was inclined to call her daughter Rose, but she was not going to endure Lady Catherine’s scorn on that subject just now.

Lady Catherine glared at her but said nothing more on the subject of names. ‘That lady,’ she said, nodding in the direction of Jane, ‘is your sister, I suppose?’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ replied Elizabeth. ‘May I present Mrs. Bingley.’

‘And that child,’ said Lady Catherine, now nodding at five-year-old Charles, ‘is your son, I suppose, Mrs. Bingley?’

‘He is, ma’am,’ said Jane sweetly. ‘Come here, Charles, and say, “Good morning, ma’am,” to Lady Catherine.’

Charles, who had the same sociability as his father, was not at all intimidated from giving a little bow and lisping a ‘Good morning, ma’am,’ to the big lady in her big, shiny, grey dress, with her big, lacy collar and her big, feathery hat. He only wondered that the lady did not smile back at him and declare him the sweetest child in the world, as ladies usually did when he made his little bows and greetings.

‘I suppose you think of betrothing them,’ said Lady Catherine, looking from the smiling little boy to the sleeping baby in Georgiana’s arms.

‘Not at all, Lady Catherine,’ said Elizabeth. ‘We hope they will be very good playfellows, but they must follow their hearts when the time comes for matrimony.’

Lady Catherine glared again at her. ‘In my day,’ she said, ‘children married whom their parents saw fit. They did not “follow their hearts.” What romantic nonsense. Ah, here comes Anne,’ she announced as Anne de Bourgh came walking very slowly across the lawn on the arm of Darcy.

Lady Catherine made a strange noise as though it gave her a pain to see her daughter on the arm of the man she had intended for Anne’s husband, walking across the grounds that Anne should have been mistress of.

‘Miss de Bourgh, how delighted we are that you could come to our daughter’s christening,’ said Elizabeth, rising up and stepping forward to greet her guest. ‘I know you must have found the journey very tiring. I hope you do not feel unwell today after the conclusion of it?’

Anne sank down upon the garden seat that Darcy led her to. Her maid fussed about her with cushions, a shawl and a blanket for her lap, despite the warmth of the morning. Anne opened her mouth to reply, but Lady Catherine spoke first.

‘Anne is exhausted after her journey. I doubt I should have brought her, but here she is. She desired to come, and I have indulged her. She cannot sit outside for long, for she burns very easily, and she is irritated by strong odours.’ Lady Catherine gave a disdainful look at the sprays of roses that clambered over the woven wicker walls of the arbour. ‘Roses in September,’ she murmured disapprovingly.

‘Would you like to hold her?’ Elizabeth was asking Anne. She had taken her baby from Georgiana and now carried her to the stone seat where Anne and Darcy sat. Anne put out her thin arms eagerly.

‘She cannot hold it,’ said Lady Catherine sharply. ‘She has not the strength; she will surely drop it.’

Anne withdrew her arms.

‘You will not drop her,’ said Elizabeth. ‘I will sit right beside you, and the moment you feel your arms grow tired, I will take her from you. Fitzwilliam will likewise guard you on the other side.’

Anne allowed the baby to be placed in her arms, and a soft smile spread over her face. Elizabeth realised it was the first time she had ever seen poor Anne smile. She generally looked only sickly and unhappy.

‘Who is that?’ asked Lady Catherine suddenly. ‘Fitzwilliam, there is a dreadful person approaching. I daresay it is a beggar come in hopes of gaining something because it is an important day. Send it away immediately.’

Darcy turned his head to look. He stood up and stared for a moment. Then he strode quickly to meet the approaching figure.

‘He will see her off,’ said Lady Catherine. ‘How dreadful that such people can come onto our private grounds. Where are the servants? Fitzwilliam must speak to them. What kind of security do the menservants keep if any old beggar can come so close to the house unchallenged?’

But Darcy was not sending the figure of the old, ragged woman away. To Lady Catherine’s astonishment, he was actually leading the revolting person towards them.

‘Good mother,’ said Elizabeth, standing up and addressing the old woman in a tone of pleasure and respect. ‘How glad we are to see you

again. Please, would you bless our daughter? It is her christening day.'

The old woman approached the baby and laid a wizened hand upon her tiny brow. There was a cry of disgust from Lady Catherine, but Darcy put a hand up to warn his aunt not to speak, an action which was so insulting to her that she was stunned into silence for some minutes.

'Would you bless my nephew also?' asked Elizabeth. 'Charles, dear, come here a moment and say good morning to the lady.'

Charles looked wonderingly at the strange figure, but he obediently came forward and lisped a good morning. The old woman put her right hand upon his forehead, her left hand still resting upon the baby.

'All the best blessings of life upon thee, that thou may give and receive love.'

'Good mother,' said Darcy, 'would you bestow a blessing upon my cousin, who sits here? I do not believe she has ever received one.'

Lady Catherine now found her voice. 'Do not lay one finger upon my daughter! Fitzwilliam, send this person away before she gives the children a nasty disease!'

'What would you wish for, child, if you were to receive one?' the old woman asked Anne.

'Do not speak to her, Anne!' called out Lady Catherine. 'Do not let her touch you!' Lady Catherine was getting to her feet and was moving towards Anne.

'Oh . . .' said Anne in a small voice. 'If I could wish for something . . . anything . . . I would wish . . . I would wish . . .'

But she did not finish, for in that moment, Lady Catherine reached them and stretched out her hand to seize hold of the old woman's arm. On reaching out her hand, she grasped only thin air, for the old woman had disappeared. Anne blinked at where she had been stood just one moment ago. Little Charles turned round in a circle looking for her.

'Aunt Catherine!' said Darcy in annoyance. 'That was the wisewoman of the county. I will be most unhappy if you have driven her away!'

'Do you talk to me in such a manner?' cried his aunt. But she said nothing further, for she was distracted by Anne holding up something before her. 'What is that?' Lady Catherine demanded.

'I do not know,' said Anne.

'It's a wish,' said Darcy. 'A large one. An adult one.'

‘I have one too!’ cried Charles, holding up a silvery disc, which was far smaller than Anne’s. ‘The magic lady gave it to me!’

‘Finish your wish, Anne,’ Darcy urged. ‘Go on.’

‘Do not listen to such foolishness, Anne,’ said her mother. ‘Give it to me instantly.’ She held out her hand.

‘Finish your wish,’ Darcy urged again.

Anne looked between her mother and her cousin and back at the silvery disc in her hand. ‘I wish . . .’ she whispered.

‘Anne Catherine Persephone de Bourgh—I am your mother, and I *demand* you give that foolish thing to me!’

‘I wish . . . for strength . . . I hate being so weak.’

Her mother reached for the wish, but just as the old woman had vanished as her hand closed upon her, so the silvery wish vanished as she snatched at it.

Lady Catherine glared at her daughter, she glared at Darcy, and she glared at Elizabeth. She glared at little Charles, who closed his hand tightly over his own little wish and hurried to his mama for fear that the big, cross lady would try to take his wish from him.

‘Make a wish, Charles,’ said Darcy. ‘Just a little one. It has not the power for anything big. When you wish for something, the wish will disappear.’

‘I wish I could have fruit jellies for luncheon again,’ said Charles. He opened his little fist; the wish was still lying in his hand. He looked round for the jellies, but there were none to be seen. ‘It doesn’t work,’ said Charles.

Elizabeth laughed. ‘I think that may be because there are already fruit jellies for luncheon. Wish again for something else.’

‘I wish . . .’ He puckered up his mouth as though he were contemplating hard what he most wanted in the world next to jellies. ‘I wish that Papa were here.’

‘Papa cannot come, dear,’ said his mother gently. ‘His poor arm has not yet mended well enough for him to ride.’

Charles opened his fist and gave a cry of triumph. ‘It’s gone!’ He showed his empty palm round for everyone to see.

‘Fitzwilliam, take me back to the house,’ said Lady Catherine. ‘I cannot bear any more of this wishing nonsense. Anne, you must come inside. This sun is too strong for you.’

‘I am very well, Mama,’ said a new, clear voice.

Everyone looked in surprise at the speaker. There was something different about Anne de Bourgh as she sat there on the garden seat. She seemed somehow taller, or perhaps it was that she was sitting up very straight instead of hunched over as usual. She drew the shawl from her shoulders and gave it to her maid behind her. She took the blanket from her lap and handed that to her also. ‘It is so pleasant here, Mama, that I shall sit a little longer. I am quite well shaded from the sun by the trellis.’

Lady Catherine stared at this strange creature speaking in a clear voice and looking around her with eyes that seemed to have a new light in them.

‘What delightful roses,’ said Anne, getting up, moving briskly to a nearby cluster, and inhaling deeply into their pink, frilled hearts. ‘Do let me hold the darling baby again, Cousin Elizabeth,’ she said next. She held out her arms to an astonished Elizabeth.

Darcy laughed heartily, something he had only learnt to do since his marriage. Georgiana joined in, thinking that this new, strange turn of events was quite delightful. Elizabeth laughed, Jane smiled, and baby Elizabeth Rose opened her tiny eyes and lifted one side of her mouth.

Charles gave a whoop of joy and charged across the lawn, almost stepping on Lady Catherine’s voluminous gown as he passed her. He flung himself into the arms of a man in a dark green coat, who caught him up and swung him round.

‘Charles!’ cried Jane in surprise. ‘How is it you are here?’

‘It’s the strangest thing,’ called back her husband, striding towards them with his son in his arms. ‘I woke up this morning, and my arm felt as good as new. I cannot account for it at all, but I made haste and rode here directly. I have been most miserably lonesome without my boy!’ He planted a kiss on little Charles’ cheek. ‘And without his mama, of course.’

‘Glad to see you, Bingley,’ said Darcy, slapping him companionably on the back.

Lady Catherine had turned away to walk back to the house. She was looking both displeased and overcome.

‘Come, Aunt,’ said Darcy soothingly, taking her arm in his. ‘It would be wise for you to sit quietly a while inside. Our guests will soon be arriving, and the afternoon and evening will be very lively. You must rest while you can.’

‘And so must Anne,’ said Lady Catherine, looking back at her daughter, who was still behaving in a most peculiar manner. She looked as though she were actually laughing with that little Bingley child.

Bingley turned to Anne and gave a bow.

‘Allow me to introduce Miss Anne de Bourgh,’ said Elizabeth. ‘Anne, this is my brother-in-law, Charles Bingley.’

‘Very glad to make your acquaintance,’ said Bingley. ‘But . . . have you a sister, for I understood that Miss de Bourgh was an invalid?’

Anne’s cheeks had such a healthy-looking bloom upon them and her eyes had such a sparkle that she could not possibly be mistaken for an invalid.

Elizabeth laughed. ‘Anne used to be troubled by poor health, but now, she is, as you see, quite well.’

Darcy turned his head at her words, looking back over his shoulder at the happy group, and shared a smile with his laughing wife.

The End

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